

**STUBBY SEES
IT THROUGH**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

King Abbie's Adventure
Faraway Island
The Black Wherry
The Crocodile Men
The Grey Pilot
Dinny Smith Comes Home
The Lost Planet
Return to the Lost Planet
Secret of the Lost Planet
The Atom Chasers
The Atom Chasers in Tibet

Stubby Sees it Through

A School Adventure Story

ANGUS MACVICAR

Illustrated by

LUNN ROBERTS



BURKE ★ LONDON

To
RIKKI FULTON, BRYDEN MURDOCH
and NEIL BROWN
who brought Stubby, Frogs and Henry
to life on the radio.

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CHAPTER ONE

CRISIS AT STRATHMUNGO

THE West Highland Express, speeding north through purple hills and grey, oily peat-hags, was crowded with boys returning to Strathmungo School after the summer holidays; but Stubby Scott, Henry Lucas and Frogs de la Tour, by the simple expedient of sticking a number of 'Reserved' labels on the windows, had secured a compartment to themselves. A bunch of these labels, dropped by an absent-minded porter at Euston, had been gratefully acquired by Henry, who, on joining his old friends at Glasgow, had put them to immediate practical use.

The three boys were between fourteen and fifteen years of age.

Henry, thin and studious-looking, was as precise as the parting in his sleek fair hair. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles and, as befitted the son of an ambassador, was inclined to decorate his conversation with Latin tags. The withering scorn of other boys had failed to cure him of this habit, and his 'eccentricity' had now become a source of pride rather than of disgust to his friends.

Frogs provided a complete contrast. French, of course—the eldest son of a lecturer at Glasgow University—he was stout and vivacious, with dark curls and twinkling brown eyes. Precision was foreign to his volatile nature; and his frequent, involuntary use of French words was the despair of Mr. Alexander Beach, head English master at Strathmungo.

Like Henry and Frogs, Stubby was wearing flannels and a school blazer of dark green; but whereas his friends' appearance was fairly trim and respectable, an unbiassed onlooker might have concluded that Stubby had spent the night in a barn. This was nothing out of the ordinary, however, for tidiness was not one of his cardinal virtues. Sturdily built and of medium height, he had rusty red hair, cut short, and his lean face was a mass of freckles.

As a general rule, his expression was frank and pleasant enough except, perhaps, on his being addressed by Mr. Hector Todd, the Maths master, when it acquired a quality of patient suffering—but now, as he watched the hazel-trees and black patches of bog flitting past the windows it was a trifle gloomy.

Henry studied him with concern.

"I say, Stubby— anything wrong?" he inquired.

"He is in love!" suggested Frogs, in a stage whisper. "Unknown to us— during the holidays— he has met a *mademoiselle*!"

"Don't talk wet!" said Stubby, irritably. "I'm just—worried. I have a queer feeling. . ."

"Ah!" interrupted Frogs, with animation. "You have the sickness of the stomach, eh? Too many *chocolats!*"

"Oh, drip off! It's got nothing to do with my stomach!"

Henry adjusted his spectacles.

"You mean you have a premonition?"

"That's it! I've a feeling there's going to be trouble this term."

"*Parbleu!*" murmured Frogs, raising expressive eyes. "Isn't there always trouble?"

Stubby ignored the interruption and embarked on an explanation of his uneasy mood.

"You know my parents are farming in Rhodesia? Well, I spent the summer in Glasgow, with an old friend of my father's—a Mr. George Davidson, who has a shipbuilding yard on the Clyde. He happens to know Sir Philip Andrews, the Chairman of our Board of Governors. Sir Philip came for lunch one day. He was telling Mr. Davidson that old Bumble's retiring and that a new Head is being appointed this term." Stubby paused for a moment, then uttered his grievous news. "Sir Philip seems to think," he announced, "that the new Head will be Mr. Hector Todd!"

For the space of several seconds no one spoke. As mention of the H-bomb brings cold despair to the hearts of politicians, so did the name of the

Maths master affect Henry and Frogs. The *clicketty-clack* of the train provided a monotonous accompaniment to their chaotic thoughts.

Finally Henry recovered his voice.

"Not—not the Toad?" he muttered, shakily.

Stubby nodded.

"Just think of it! The Toad—Head of Strathmungo!"

"I *cannot* think of it!" declared Frogs, passionately beating his hands together. "That *animal*—that *cochon!*"

"As Juvenal puts it," mourned Henry, "*monstrum nulla virtute redemptum*. A monster redeemed by no single virtue!"

Stubby leaned forward, cupping his long chin in his hands.

"That just about describes him. If he gets the job we're sunk!"

"Ah, *oui!*" Frogs' protruding eyes had a haunted look. "He will remember the day you put carbide in his inkwell! And the time Henry showed him his mistake in the algebra problem."

Henry nodded.

"And those beetles, Frogs! The ones that came out of your desk and started to crawl over the floor!"

"Shall I ever forget! No wonder you are anxious, Stubby! That smile of his! That voice, like. . . like. . ."

"Like treacle," suggested Henry.

"Ah, *oui*—like the treacle!"

Again they retired into the murk of their own reflections. A few straggling cottages appeared beside the railway-track, and the hills gave place to green farm-land. In the distance, open sea came into view, sparkling in the September sun. The train was beginning to slow down when Henry spoke.

"Why don't they appoint Sandy Beach?" he complained. "He'd make a decent kind of Head."

"I know," replied Stubby. "And after all, they *may* do," he went on, sitting upright and assuming a cheerfulness he did not feel. "Sir Philip only *thinks* it'll be Hector."

Henry and Frogs nodded, but without optimism: and before either of them could make a further contribution to the conversation the train whistled and slid to a grinding stop. Henry glanced out at the familiar platform, at the rows of clipped rhododendron bushes, at the line of red buses drawn up on the main road beyond.

"Hail Strathmungo, *alma mater*!" he sighed, standing up unwillingly and stretching for his case. "I was looking forward to coming back, but now things are changed."

Stubby sighed in sympathy and opened the door of the compartment. Outside, hordes of green-blazered boys were already running to claim seats in the buses which would take them to the School. He thought to himself: "Poor

idiots! Little do they know what may be coming to them!" Then the idea that he should possess such intimate knowledge of impending events suddenly made him feel better. As he stepped on to the platform he turned to Henry and Frogs.

"Brace up, chaps!" he encouraged them. "We'll know the worst at Double tomorrow morning, when Sir Philip gives his usual beginning of term pep-talk."

A hundred years ago, Strathmungo had been the home of a Scots nobleman. But its situation in a lonely West Highland parish had proved a disadvantage to the nobleman's successors, and it had been sold to the public-spirited founders of the School.

A long, three-storied building of red sandstone, shaped like the letter H, it had two stone-flagged quadrangles, junior and senior -and woe betide any boy under the age of fourteen who strayed into the second of these! It had been erected on a high, wooded plateau, which gave ample room for a playing field, though from the village far beneath, this smooth and grassy park seemed to have been cut out of the surrounding woodland by the stroke of a giant scythe. Behind the School craggy, heather-patched, Ben Caladh sheltered it from the north wind.

From the main entrance one had a glimpse of beauty characteristic of the West Highlands.

To the right the dark cliffs of Laggan Point,

and beneath them, even on a calm day, the startling contrast of a white sea-surge on the Boulder Reef. To the left, at shore-level, Strathmungo Village—a cluster of multi-coloured roofs, red and grey and brown—smoke from its chimneys rising to the level of the School like supplicating arms; and beyond the village an area of cultivated land shading finally into a ridge of barren hills.

Directly beneath the School was Laggan Bay, into which the Atlantic rolled in wrinkled, cream-crested waves. One enclosing arm consisted of a great promontory, the Rinns of Laggan, in the shelter of which a narrow jetty pointed to the east.

In front, far out to sea, were the small, misty islands of the Hebrides, fragments of onyx scattered on a sapphire-coloured cloth.

In secret most of the boys loved and appreciated this picture; but they never spoke of it among themselves. To do so would have been a sign of 'wetness'—even of effeminacy. But there were many 'Old Boys', sweating in the desert sun or fanning themselves in the humidity of a jungle night, who repeated nostalgically the words of their School Song:

*Fair Strathmungo's hills and braes
In the Highland air so clear:
To their beauty now we raise
Our song of love and mem'ry dear.*

Hail Strathmungo, alma mater!

Let us be thy faithful sons.

Courage in the hour of danger,

Till the victory is won.

Inside, the lay-out of the building had not been substantially altered from the original plan. The dormitories on the first and second floors were, for the most part, smallish rooms in which no more than two or three boys had their beds and lockers. On the ground floor were the class-rooms, the school offices, dining-rooms and hospital, grouped about a central hall which made the cross-stroke of the H.

It was to this hall that Stubby, Henry and Frogs made their way the following morning, summoned like over a hundred and fifty other boys by a strident bell. They found seats near the back and awaited with as much fortitude as they could muster the ceremony which always marked the beginning of a new term.

At one end of the hall was a platform supporting a piano, a table, a number of chairs and a reading-desk. As the boys settled in their places, people began to appear on this platform, and Stubby and his friends observed them with the cold interest of scientists inspecting bugs.

First a series of masters of no particular interest as far as this story is concerned, all of whom seemed to have been formed in the special

mould reserved for teachers at public-schools: a mould of dry neatness, impeccable manners and a good accent.

Then, in a murmur of amused but affectionate applause, Mr. Simon Pomphrey arrived on the scene, blinking behind his spectacles and smiling a vague apology as he tripped over the piano-stool. A fluffy, white-haired and somewhat larger edition of Mr. Pickwick, he taught History in a hazy fashion and entirely without discipline. In spite of his failings, however, he was loved by everyone in the School.

Behind him entered Mr. Alexander Beach, more often referred to as Sandy. He was the youngest member of the staff—a tall, dark young man, clean-shaven and quiet, with the shoulders of a Rugger forward. He had, in fact, played for Scotland in the front row. During the War he had served as a Flight-Lieutenant in the R.A.F. and had been awarded the D.F.C.; but few people knew of this, for he seldom mentioned it himself. In addition to being head English master, he looked after the sporting activities of the School.

Finally there appeared Mr. Hector Todd, otherwise the Toad. He was thin and straight-mouthed, with an unhealthily pale complexion. Behind his pince-nez, chill grey eyes stared into one's soul and aroused, in the case of certain of his pupils, feelings of the utmost loathing. Across his waistcoat hung a gold watch-chain and red

albert which he was in the habit of fingering as he talked.

He was accompanied by Sir Philip Andrews, a burly, pleasant-faced man of about fifty with a small military moustache and bushy eyebrows, who combined the position of the local laird -- his house was less than a mile away from the School --- with the duties of Chairman of Strathmungo's Board of Governors.

Stubby, Henry and Frogs pricked up their ears as the Toad, smiling his usual soapy smile, advanced to the reading-desk and cleared his throat.

"Silence, please." He held up a thin, ascetic hand, and the buzz of conversation was instantly silenced. "I am sorry to say," he continued, fumbling with his albert, "that our old Head, Dr. McGregor, cannot be with us today. He has, indeed, announced his intention of retiring, owing to ill-health. In the meantime, as senior master, I will attempt to take his place -- in my own imperfect way."

"Smariny brute!" muttered Stubby.

"But the Chairman of our Board of Governors will have more to say on this subject. Boys" -- with a sycophantic smile -- "there is no need for me to introduce Sir Philip Andrews, who will now give his usual beginning of term address."

Henry glanced at his friends.

"The Toad doesn't say he's actually been *appointed*," he whispered.

Frogs nodded.

"While there is life we are alive!"

"While there's life there's hope, you idiot!" growled Stubby. "When will you learn to quote properly!"

Sir Philip took his place at the reading-desk and beamed on the gathering.

"My dear boys, it is most stimulating to see so many happy, fresh young faces to see how ready and eager you are to begin another term at Strathmungo. Strathmungo, our dear old School, with its challenging motto, *Gaudet tentamine virtus*. Virtue delights in the test."

He paused. Bluff, good-humoured and insensitive to atmosphere, he had no idea that the mood of his audience had abruptly changed, that on Mr. Todd's public announcement of his own position as temporary Head the "happy, fresh young faces" had become blank and stony. Nor did he realise that Henry Lucas, that youthful pedant, was shaking his head and murmuring to his companions: "Wrong quantities as usual! Not *virtus*. *Virtus*."

"And for every one of us," he went on, warming to his theme and evidently enjoying himself, "this term will indeed be a test. It will test the character of the new boys, who will be learning our traditions and routine: our emphasis on outdoor sports of the less orthodox kinds, sailing, riding and mountain-climbing, our constant

aim to acquire self-confidence and self-reliance. It will test also the dignity and common-sense of both the Staff and the Board of Governors, because, owing to the unfortunate illness of Dr. McGregor, we must, within the next few weeks, appoint a new Headmaster."

His phrases echoed sonorously in the high, domed hall, and it occurred to him that he was getting an unusually attentive hearing. He left the reading-desk and advanced to the limit of the platform.

"Here it comes!" groaned Henry.

"The Governors' choice," said Sir Philip, "will be announced in due course. Temporarily, however, as he himself has already indicated, Mr. Todd will act as Head, and I know I can rely upon you all to give him the utmost loyalty and support. . ."

His voice boomed on.

"Not as bad as it might have been," decided Henry in a relieved whisper. "Sandy's still in the running, anyway."

But Stubby's expression had assumed a Napoleonic gravity, untouched by either hope or despair.

"Listen, you chaps," he said. "I'll bet it's between the Toad and Sandy. . . There's only one thing for it. *Somehow*—by hook or by crook—we must do the Toad in the eye and get Sandy appointed!"



CHAPTER TWO

SIMPLE SIMON

THERE was always one part of the day which brought comfort and a degree of happiness to Stubby and his friends. It was the History period, taken by Mr. Simon Pomparey. Not that Stubby and Frogs were eager students of the past. Far from it. And Henry, though as keen on History as he was on English, Maths and Latin, did not invariably allow his pursuit of knowledge to interfere with the simpler pleasures. No: the real cause of its popularity was Simple Simon's unfortunate lack of resistance to an occasional leg-haul.

On that first, fateful morning of the new term, he adjusted gold-rimmed spectacles, stroked a balding, fluffy head and announced to the Third Form, with disarming diffidence, that he would begin a detailed study of the Indian Mutiny. For twenty minutes he rambled on, undeterred by frequent restless movements in the class. One window was open. Fresh, pine-scented air flowed into the room, adding to the boys' growing impatience with Robert Clive and the Black Hole of Calcutta, and to their desire for relaxation.

"And while on the subject," remarked Simple Simon, with a confidential air, "I wonder how many of you know that it was in 1858--during the Siege of Lucknow--that Strathmungo was founded?"

Henry thought it was time to start something. Up shot his right hand.

"I knew that, sir."

Mr. Pomphrey smiled and nodded.

"Ah, very good, Lucas. Very good, indeed!" He caught sight of Stubby, whose hand was also raised. "Yes, Scott?" he inquired.

"Was it always a place for chaps whose parents are abroad? And for chaps like Frogs -I mean de le Tout, sir - whose mother is -er- -dead?"

"Yes." Simple Simon swallowed the bait. "The Constitution mentions 'children of Empire-builders and orphans of whatever nationality.' That is why we have a school composed of English boys, Scots boys, Irish boys and even French boys --all united in the comradeship of learning and sport." Enlarging on the point, he suddenly became uneasy. "But surely you know all this already, Scott? I seem to remember you asking the same question last year and the year before."

Stubby was the picture of innocence, his freckled face resembling more than ever a peewit's egg.

"One is apt to forget, sir," he murmured.

"Quite." Mr. Pomphrey readily forgave him. "But enough of Strathmungo," he went on. "We must return to our survey of the Indian Mutiny—" He broke off, interrupted by an unusual thudding sound. "What on earth is that?" he demanded, peering short-sightedly through his spectacles.

"A bird, sir," explained Henry. "Inside the high window."

For a moment the Indian Mutiny was forgotten as Mr. Pomphrey and his class watched the small intruder, its wings whirring like propellers, vainly attempting to fly through a pane of glass.

"How could it have got in?" murmured Simple Simon, staring up.

"Window's open, sir," replied Henry.

"Of course - so it is!"

Stubby rose.

"It's a sparrow, sir," he volunteered, respectfully. "May I catch it and put it out?"

"Yes. But--er--how are you going to get up to the window?"

"I'll use this chair, sir, and climb on top of the bookcase."

Something was telling Mr. Pomphrey that according to the way they were shaping events might soon get out of hand; but for the life of him he could not think of a scheme to maintain control.

"Very well," he replied, weakly. "But—but try not to damage anything."

Frogs approached the scene of action, followed by Henry and the remainder of the class. They stood in a semi-circle, like spectators at some tribal rite, watching Stubby as he clambered on top of the bookcase. Mr. Pomphrey realised that he ought to have told them to keep their places; but now, as usual, it was too late.

"Scott, do be careful!" he pleaded. "If we break the window or the glass doors of the bookcase. . ."

Balanced ten feet above the floor, Stubby interrupted cheerfully: "It's all right, sir. Shan't be a jiffy."

He stretched up, one hand poised to secure his quarry. But as he lunged forward, the sparrow fluttered to one side and his fingers struck the bare window with a resounding smack.

"What a pity!" sighed Mr. Pomphrey

"I will mount the bookcase also," announced Frogs. "Many hands make the work easy!"

Simple Simon made an ineffectual attempt to stop him.

"There is no necessity. . ." he began; but Frogs was already scrambling aloft beside his friend.

"I am more tall than Scott, sir. I can reach very high." He took up position on a precarious pile of dusty books "Now, I will make the attempt. . . Ah, *peste* / I have missed it also!"

Mr. Pomphrey wrung his hands. He was extremely worried, for the noise in the room had

become considerable. But somehow this annoying bird had to be caught and put out, or the period would be ruined. . . .

"If I may offer advice, sir," said Henry, "they ought to use a duster."

"Ah, yes. Yes, indeed." Mr. Pomphrey clutched at a straw. "It would deaden the blows on the glass. Get one from the blackboard, Lucas."

Henry handed it up.

"Now, Scott—one last effort!" directed Simple Simon. "We're making a dreadful commotion, really. If Mr. Todd comes in. . ."

"I will try to make friends with it," suggested Frogs. "When it comes to me, Stubby, you must pounce with the duster!"

"Right-oh!"

Frogs began to use a wheedling tone.

"Leetle sparrow," he murmured, "come to papa! Come to papa, *ma petite!*"

The bird seemed to recognise a friend and moved closer.

"You'll soon have it eating out of your hand!" declared Stubby. "Look, sir, it's smiling at de la Tour."

"Don't be ridiculous, Scott! Smiling!" Mr. Pomphrey tried hard to express both impatience and scorn; but he couldn't help the hint of a chuckle in his voice. Detecting this, the spectators began to laugh, and their laughter spurred Frogs to even greater efforts.

"Come, my darling leetle sparrow! Come. . ."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, its wings still beating a rapid tattoo on the window, the bird edged towards Frogs. Three feet away. . . Now two. . . Now one. . .



Stubby and Frogs leaped desperately for the floor.

Then Stubby saw it was time to act. Whirling the duster, he thrust out his hand with the speed of an attacking cobra. But this time instead of a dull innocuous thud, there was a crash and an ominous tinkle of breaking glass. Like a spirit of joy, the sparrow darted through a jagged hole in the window and flew off towards the woods.

"Oh, dear—I *knew* this would happen!" moaned Mr. Pomphrey, skipping aside to avoid a shower of splinters. But in point of fact his troubles had only just begun.

"Look out, sir!" exclaimed Henry. "Frogs has lost his balance the bookcase is coming down! . . . Jump for it, you two!"

And as the class uttered a combined sigh of exquisite delight, Stubby and Frogs leaped desperately for the floor, while the big bookcase fell behind them with a noise like thunder, its twin glass doors shivering into a thousand fragments. A cloud of dust flew high and slowly settled.

"Gosh - sorry, sir!" gasped Stubby, appalled; while Frogs, who had been pinned beneath a cascade of volumes comprising a complete *History of the Napoleonic Wars*, staggered dazedly to his feet.

"Oh, dear, what an unfortunate accident!" began Mr. Pomphrey, but suddenly, as he spoke, the door of the room opened. . . .

Mr. Pomphrey turned. The class turned. Silence fell upon the scene of devastation, and twenty-one pairs of eyes focussed on a thin, pale-faced man standing on the threshold, a man who fingered the red albert on his watch-chain with feline regularity.

A rasping voice broke the tension.

"Mr. Pomphrey—may I ask the meaning of this?"

Simple Simon advanced a few shaky steps.

"I—I'm sorry, Mr. Todd," he stammered.
"There was a bird. . ."

"A what?"

"A bird—a sparrow."

Behind his pince-nez, the Toad's eyes were as cold as the mountain tarns behind Ben Caladh.

"What are you raving about, Mr. Pomphrey? This is disgraceful!"

"Please, allow me to explain."

"The facts are too obvious to require an explanation. A broken window, a bookcase in smithereens, valuable books in tatters." Mr. Todd seemed to gloat upon the catalogue of destruction. "As temporary Head of Strathmungo," he went on, "I have my duty to perform." Then he caught sight of Stubby, and a nasty, mirthless smile touched one corner of his mouth. "Ah—Scott! I didn't notice you at first. Scott. . . Lucas. . . and de la Tour—I might have known!"

Gallantly, like a merchant cruiser challenging a pocket battleship, Simple Simon tried to defend his boys.

"Excuse me, Mr. Todd. They couldn't help it. They—"

"I didn't ask for your opinion, Mr. Pomphrey!" The Toad's interruption was quick and venomous. "Now then, Scott, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, sir, except it wasn't Mr. Pomphrey's fault."

"M'm. So this time you do admit your—er—culpability?"

"Yes, sir."

Summoning up all his courage, Mr. Pomphrey was about to speak again; but a thin, commanding hand enforced his silence.

"I see," remarked the Toad, softly. "And you, de la Tour, are you involved?"

Frogs swallowed.

"Ah, *oui, monsieur!* I am to blame much more than Scott. I am so—what you call?—so clumsy."

"That will do! And don't call me 'moosoor,' call me 'sir!'. . . What have *you* to say, Lucas?"

"I egged them on, sir."

"Most interesting!" Delicately the Toad wound his watch-chain on an index-finger. "Well, Mr. Pomphrey, if you cannot maintain discipline, it seems I must take a hand. These boys have confessed their guilt. . ."

Simple Simon made a last effort to stem the tide.

"They couldn't help it. Really, it was most unfortunate—"

"I will speak to you later, Mr. Pomphrey—in private," said the Toad. "Meanwhile, this kind of thing must be stopped. Tonight, Scott, after prep, you will write out *I must not act like a hooligan* five hundred times. Lucas and de la Tour will each do it four hundred times."

Stubby's face flushed red beneath the freckles.

"But—but, sir —Mr. Beach is showing us how to sail a boat this evening—"

"Silence! You will inform Mr. Beach with my compliments that you are not available. I will leave you now. Get this mess cleared up, Mr. Pomphrey, and tell the janitor to repair the window and the bookcase as soon as possible."

Simple Simon blinked.

"Very well," he sighed.

"Oh, and by the way, Scott," observed the Toad, "when you come to my study with your lines tomorrow morning, make certain that your clothes are brushed and that your tie is straight. You are disgracefully untidy. . . . Good morning!"

The brightness had gone out of Mr. Pomphrey's day, and for the remainder of the period he found it difficult to concentrate on the Indian Mutiny. The prospect of a private dressing-down from Mr. Todd did not worry him unduly: he was accustomed to 'rockets' for his lack of discipline. What did make him unhappy was the conviction that he himself was to blame for the punishment that had overtaken Scott and his friends. With more firmness and decision on his part, the whole unpleasant incident might have been avoided. He had allowed the situation to get out of hand, and in consequence Scott, Lucas and de la Tour would now have to spend the evening indoors.

That night, about ten o'clock, he went to Sandy's room for a cup of tea and a smoke. For some obscure reason, which might have had to do with a common affection for their pupils, friendship had ripened between the ineffective, elderly master and his vigorous young colleague. As they sat in deep armchairs on either side of a log-fire, Sandy noted the worried look on his visitor's face and guessed its cause.

"I say, Simon, Scott and Co. couldn't come sailing tonight. Lines, I gather. What happened?"

The other coughed, deprecatingly.

"It was most unfortunate. A bird came into my room. Like a fool I allowed them to try and catch it. Scott broke the window, de la Tour lost his balance and upset the bookcase, and just at that moment, with the whole class in an uproar, Todd came in!"

Sandy smiled at his tragic expression.

"Hard luck, old man! . . . Have another cup of tea?"

"No, thank you. But may I light a cigarette?"

"Of course."

"You know, Sandy," continued Mr. Pomphrey, "I—er—I really cannot bring myself to *like* Mr. Todd. The boys would much prefer *you* as their Head. And between ourselves—so should I!"

Sandy filled a pipe and told himself that whatever happened he must try to be fair. His ambition was to become Head of Strathmungo,

his old School. But he realised that Todd's scholastic qualifications were much better than his own and was determined to accept loyally the final ruling of the Board of Governors.

"I'm not building up my hopes," he said, non-committally. "Besides, he's senior."

"I had a most gruelling ten minutes in his study this afternoon," confessed Mr. Pomphrey. "He gave me a lecture on—er—on maintaining discipline. I shouldn't have minded it from Dr. McGregor, but I am twenty years older than Todd, twenty years at least."

"Poor old Simon! Never mind, I bet the boys still love you!"

"Oh, I do hope so. . . . You know, I have a great liking for young Scott. He stood up for me, said it wasn't my fault and took all the blame on himself."

Sandy nodded. Striking a match, he lit his pipe.

"I try to keep it dark, but I like him, too. If only his mind and person were a bit more tidy! Only this evening, at prep, I caught him reading the most awful 'blood.' *The Dark Avengers*, or something fierce like that. He wasn't at all put out. Said it had a similar plot to *Macbeth*, that was why he was studying it! I hadn't just the heart to punish him!"

"Typical!" chuckled Mr. Pomphrey. Then he grew serious again. "But I'm afraid Mr. Todd doesn't like him," he added.

"No, Scott never toadies. Too much of an individualist. Have you noticed how he takes all the odd, unusual characters under his wing—Lucas and de la Tour, for example? If it weren't for Scott they'd have a pretty rough time of it among the other boys. Foreigners and keen scholars always do."

For a time the two men smoked in companionable silence. All the boys, except the most senior, had gone to bed, and for once the stone-flagged corridors were quiet.

Suddenly Sandy grinned.

"There's one thing Todd doesn't realise," he said. "Scott is acquainted with Sir Philip Andrews. Met him at a friend's house during the summer, I believe."

"Indeed?"

"M'm. I meant to take him sailing on Saturday afternoon instead of tonight, he and Lucas and de la Tour, but apparently they've been invited to Sir Philip's house for tea."

"Good gracious!" Mr. Pomphrey became more anxious-looking than ever. "I do hope they behave themselves!"

Sandy nodded and chuckled.

"I'd give a lot to be at that tea-party!" he said.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TEA-PARTY

WHEN Stubby got the invitation to tea from Sir Philip Andrews — an invitation which included both Henry and Frogs, who were known to be his chief cronies — he had at first dismissed it as an extra, and possibly somewhat boring duty. He knew that Sir Philip was in the habit of asking several boys to his house each term; and no doubt he and his friends had been chosen because of his meeting with the Chairman of the Board of Governors during the holidays.

Besides, Stubby had more to exercise his mind than the prospect of an ordinary tea-party. The monotonous labour of writing out five hundred lines had stiffened his resolve not only to oppose the Toad's bid for the Headmastership but also to help Sandy's cause in every possible way. It was easy, however, to declare his intention. What in fact could be *done* about it?

Each night in the small dormitory allocated to them by the understanding Mr. Pomphrey, he and Henry and Frogs discussed ways and means of putting a spoke in Mr. Todd's wheel; but on the Saturday morning, as they—and the entire

Third Form—panted over the heights of Ben Caladh in Sandy's wake, no sensible plan of action had yet occurred to them. It was when they returned to the School and were relaxing under a warm shower, that Stubby remembered Sir Philip's invitation and lit upon a brilliant idea. At any rate, he himself described it as a brilliant idea; and when he explained it afterwards to his friends, while dressing for the party, they were inclined to agree with him.

"The scheme," he said, "is to praise up Sandy—all the time. Work on Sir Philip's feelings. As Chairman, he's bound to have a lot of influence with the Governors. I thought this tea-party might be an awful bore, but it's a godsend, really."

Frog's large and cheerful face creased into a frown of concentration.

"Can we tell Sir Philip how much we—how much we dislike *Monstrous Toad*?" he inquired at last.

"No. That wouldn't be fair," said Stubby, judicially. "Besides, he'd see through it and be keener on the Toad than ever."

Brushing his smooth hair before the mirror, Henry nodded agreement.

"Propaganda should never be too obvious. . . . By the way," he went on, "I believe Sir Philip's daughter is at home just now. Convalescing after 'flu. Matron told me this morning when I asked her for clean handkerchiefs."

Stubby gloomed over his shoe-laces.

"Gosh, that's a blow!" he muttered. "She's generally at school at this time of year."

Henry shrugged.

"Sally's quite harmless by all accounts. All the same I think you'd better put some *groise* on your hair, Stubby."

"Next time we go to the barber's I'm jolly well going to get a convict-cut," replied his friend, surveying his tousled red locks in the mirror and sprinkling a quantity of hair-oil on his palm. "Then I shan't need to worry."

"The Toad would make the objection," Frogs reminded him.

"I suppose he would!" Thoughtfully Stubby began to comb his hair. "Anyway," he went on more lightly, "that's the plan for this afternoon. Every chance we get, praise up Sandy. And don't spare the butter!"

The path to Sir Philip's house led through the pine-woods, and Stubby and his friends were inclined to linger on the way. There was an unusual tree-fungus to be examined, and delicately tasted for a hint of poison; a thicket of bramble-bushes to be explored for berries; an owl on a rotten branch to be stared at and volubly insulted; and finally, to Frog's delight, a nest of field-mice requiring the immediate attention of a kind patron.

When at last they knocked at the door of

Strathmungo Lodge, traces of their journey were clearly visible. Henry's flannel trousers had a damp patch on one knee; Frog's curly hair was awry, and a mysterious, heaving mass made a bulge in one pocket of his blazer. But it was Stubby—as usual—whose appearance was most suggestive of rude country life. The freckles on one cheek were obscured by a smear of black fungus; his blazer-buttons were in the wrong holes, giving him a curious lop-sided look; his shoes were caked with mud, and the turn-up on one trouser-leg was turned down.

Sir Philip, however, greeted them warmly and paid no attention to their untidy state. He was used to boys.

"Come into the drawing-room," he said, heartily. "We'll have tea first; and then I hope you'll have time to explore the garden. Between ourselves, there are still some late strawberries."

"Ah, *magnifique!*" Frog rolled his eyes. "Only this morning I say to our beloved master, Mr. Beach, 'Strawberries are my favourite fruit.'"

"Splendid!" Sir Philip opened the drawing-room door and ushered them in. "Here is my daughter, Sally," he went on, "I don't think you've actually met each other before."

She was perhaps a year younger than her guests, but attendance at an exclusive school for girls had given her much more poise and social grace. Small and slim, with bright blue eyes and

dark hair falling to her shoulders, she gave the boys a smiling welcome. Stubby and Henry shook hands stiffly; but Frogs bowed low, with a flash of white teeth.

"*Enchanté, mademoiselle!*" he murmured.

Sir Philip smiled.

"I see you are good at paying compliments, young man, like all your countrymen, eh? . . . Now, sit by the table. My wife has had to go to Edinburgh, but I am fortunate in having Sally to act as my hostess."

Stubby eyed with appreciation the piles of sandwiches, buns and cakes.

"Sorry we're a bit late, sir," he apologised.

"Only about five minutes," returned Sir Philip, cheerfully. "Come, do help yourselves."

"It was Frogs, sir," explained Stubby, developing his point with dour conscientiousness. "He collects mice. We found a nest as we were coming across from the School, below a rotten tree. It was simply crawling with young ones!"

Pouring out a cup of tea for herself, Sally uttered an exclamation of disgust; but Stubby ignored her.

"And so of course Frogs had to stop and pick out a few specimens. That's why we're late," he concluded.

"How awful!" pouted Sally. "I *hate* mice!"

Frogs looked uneasy.

"I am sorry," he said. "If I had known. . ."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Never mind, Frogs. I don't suppose for one minute that you brought them with you, so that's all right."

Her father laughed.

"I didn't know de la Tour was a naturalist!" he said.

"He takes spasms, sir," replied Henry.

"Spasms?"

"I mean—sometimes it's mice, sometimes tadpoles. Last term it was beetles. Mr. Beach says it's psychological. An exceedingly clever man, Mr. Beach!"

Sally was a trifle awed by Henry's use of such high-sounding words.

"I hear *you're* terribly clever, too," she said.

"You've only got to listen to him to know that!" put in Stubby, with a grin.

Henry kicked him under the table.

"Rot!" he said, blushing.

But Frogs waved enthusiastic hands, almost upsetting his tea-cup.

"*Mais oui!* Our friend is a genius. Always top of the Form. We are - what you call? - proud of him!"

Sir Philip noticed Henry's acute embarrassment and came to his rescue.

"And where do you come in, de la Tour? You and Scott."

"Stubby is about the middle, but I am at the end of the tail!"

"Frogs and I aren't very keen on Maths," explained Stubby. "That's our weakness. But we're good at English. Actually, having Mr. Beach for English is a great help. We work for him like slaves!"

Sir Philip was sceptical.

"I should have thought de la Tour at least would be at a disadvantage in the English class—being French?"

"Ah, *non!*" Frogs hastened to correct this impression. "Mr. Beach is so patient, so—so kind."

Stubby attacked a large piece of iced cake and accepted a fourth cup of tea from Sally. He was fairly satisfied with how things were going. Henry and Frogs were backing him up manfully; and though Sir Philip had so far ignored their complimentary references to Sandy, they were probably making an impression on his subconscious mind. Like water dripping on a stone, he thought. . . .

"And are you all looking forward to the new term?" inquired their host.

"Yes, indeed, sir," replied Henry, who, in spite of his prim appearance, had an excellent appetite and was now disposing of a third chocolate biscuit. "I like the winter term best. Sailing to begin with. Then riding and mountain-climbing.

Of course," he added, "Mr. Beach is terrific as Sports Master."

For the first time Sir Philip realised that a certain name was cropping up with monotonous regularity.

"You're all very fond of Mr. Beach, I gather?" he said, a hint of surprise in his voice.

"Oh, yes, *rather!*" exclaimed Stubby, gulping down the greater part of a bun in his eagerness to speak.

"Is he the young man with the broad shoulders and the nice smile?" inquired Sally.

"That's him, that's he, I mean," said Henry.

Frogs assumed a wrapt expression.

"We all love him!" he declared. "So strict and yet so just. So happy he makes us—"

"But don't you like Mr. Todd equally as well?" interrupted Sir Philip.

A severe silence fell upon the table. Pain spread across Stubby's face, while Henry fumbled absent-mindedly for another biscuit. Then Frogs, apparently overcome by emotion, gave a loud hiccup and began to choke. He turned red as a beetroot, and whines of agony escaped from his open mouth.

"Good Lord, what's the matter!" exclaimed Sir Philip.

Stubby began to slap his friend on the back.

"He's swallowed some tea the wrong way, sir!"

Sally stifled a scream. Chairs were pushed back, and in the space of a few seconds the peaceful drawing-room had become a scene of bedlam. Frogs wheezed and whooped and spluttered; Henry offered shrill advice, and Stubby continued to belabour the victim's back.

"I say, Scott, don't *kill* the chap!" shouted Sir Philip.

In his extremity, Frogs rose clumsily to his feet. Tears poured from his eyes, temporarily blinding him. His knee struck the table, and the teapot capsizing like a stricken ship, fell sullenly to the floor, breaking into two halves with a gush of hot tea.

"Oh, what will Mother say!" wailed Sally. "Our best teapot!"

The shock seemed to hasten Frog's recovery. Coughing and still wheezing, but at last in control of his breath, he surveyed the damage with staring eyes.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he gasped "How can I make the apologies! I could not see. I was blinded—"

"Your handkerchief, Frogs!" interrupted Henry. "Wipe up the mess on the carpet!"

"Ah, *oui*. I will make the amends!"

Swiftly, thoughtlessly, he jerked a handkerchief from the bulging pocket of his blazer. But more than a handkerchief came squirming into view. . . .

Sally shrieked and jumped wildly on a chair.



Sally shrieked and jumped wildly on a chair.

"Look what's come out of his pocket!" she cried. "Help! Help—save me!"

"*Parbleu!*" exclaimed Frogs, completely unmannered. "I had forgotten. . . ."

Over the carpet streamed a cohort of field-mice: dun-coloured mice, fawn-coloured mice; large, medium and small mice; mice that squeaked and tittered, mice that moved to remote corners of the room with silent, undulating speed.

"Frogs—you absolute *idiot!*" groaned Stubby.

"For heaven's sake, Scott, don't stand there with your mouth open! Pick 'em up!" commanded Sir Philip. "You, too, Lucas! De la Tour seems quite incapable of doing anything!"

Obediently Stubby and Henry went into action. They dashed about, upsetting chairs, bumping against the piano, tripping over the coal-scuttle. As they caught each mouse they put it back into Frog's pocket. Perched on her chair, the skirt of her frock wound tightly round her legs, Sally added her lamentations to the general din.

Frogs turned to his host, eyes protruding, hands outspread.

"Oh, please, *monsieur*--a thousand pardons! I am ashamed, I am desolate--"

"It's my drawing-room that's desolate!" snapped Sir Philip. "Oh, do be quic, Sally!" he went on, irritably, as his daughter uttered yet another squeal of terror. "They won't eat you!"

But she was impervious to sarcasm.

"Save me, Stubby!" she cried. "Here's one below my chair!"

Stubby went to her assistance. As he caught the mouse he looked up at her with an artificial smile of encouragement.

"I think that's them all now!" he panted.

But the piano was open, and just then it emitted a dainty trill.

"No, no!" shrieked Sally. "There's another--on the keys of the piano!"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Sir Philip. "This is getting more like a mad-house every minute!"

All at once Frogs became aware that so far he had done nothing to relieve the situation.

"I will get him!" he cried, leaping towards the piano. Like an avenging Fate he raised one hand, paused for a moment until the mouse stood still, then made a lightning grab. But the mouse eluded him. All that happened was a thunderous dissonance inside the piano, as his fingers struck the keys.

"Quick, try again!" exhorted Henry.

Frogs did so with a similar result. . . .

By this time the mouse was dashing up and down, playing a tune not unlike Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*. Becoming more and more excited Frogs intensified his efforts, but still without success. Each time as he missed his mark he struck a louder and more untuneful chord, until at last the lightsome *Spring Song* music was completely overpowered.

Stubby glared at his friend.

"Frogs, you ghastly idiot—don't be in such a hurry! Wait—I'll stalk it."

"What next!" muttered Sir Philip.

With a frown of concentration, both hands curved high like a mesmerist, Stubby began to follow the mouse backwards and forwards as it ran along the tinkling keys. Then quite suddenly it came to rest, probably overcome by sheer exhaustion, and Stubby saw his chance. With a discordant clang he brought the chase to an end.

"Got it!" he cried, triumphantly.

Sir Philip wiped his forehead.

"Thank the Lord!" he said. "Sure that's the lot?"

Henry was the calmest person in the room.

"Yes, sir," he replied precisely.

Sally got down from the chair, her eyes distraught.

"Oh, dear - that was dreadful!" she exclaimed.

"I told you, I *hate* mice!"

"*Mademoiselle*, forgive me " began Frogs; but Sir Philip interrupted.

"Don't take it to heart, de la Tour," he said in a more friendly way; for now that the disturbance was over, his natural good-humour made him inclined to see the fun of it. "No good crying over spilt milk— or spilt tea, to be more exact! But I think you'd better go back to School now—

all of you. I'm afraid Sally's not in a mood to show you round the garden."

An anxious look came into Stubby's eyes.

"You—er—you won't tell Mr. Todd about this, sir?"

Sir Philip smiled. His drawing-room looked as if it had been struck by a typhoon; but he was a just man, and long ago he had been an awkward boy himself.

"Of course not," he promised, as he escorted them to the door. "Don't worry about that. . . . And perhaps your next visit will be more of a success," he added, with gruff good will.

Sadly, their hopes of influencing Sir Philip in Sandy's favour completely ruined, Stubby, Henry and Frogs made their way back to School. But the woodland path was no longer magical. The tree-fungus was raw and uninteresting; the owl sneered at them as they passed - or so they imagined; and Frogs unhappily returned the field-mice to their nest --all except three.

CHAPTER FOUR

SECRET SOCIETY

ON their return from Strathmungo Lodge, Stubby and his friends wandered disconsolately through the senior quad. Small eddies of wind lifted dust and dry leaves and whisked them into stony alcoves and grimy, carved embrasures. The place was deserted, for most of the masters and boys were out sailing. As it sank behind Laggan Point, the sun cast a flood of light on the smooth water of the Bay, and on this golden surface small boats were moving like pieces of black confetti.

Stubby led the way towards a wooden door near the rain-water butts. It was studded with brass nails and gave access to the cellars—or 'dungeons' as the boys called them, though in point of fact Strathmungo had been built long after real dungeons had finally gone out of fashion.

"Come on, chaps," he said. "Let's go in here and talk things over."

"Why in here?" asked Henry.

"Well, for one thing we'll be out of the way.

Nobody will start asking why we're back from Sir Philip's so soon. And for another thing, I'm jolly well in a 'dungeon' mood!"

Frogs knew what he meant.

"*Et moi aussi*," he said with a sigh.

"Dark and *down*," put in Henry. "Yes, I suppose there *is* a psychological connection."

The heavy door was unlocked. Shutting it behind them, they began to descend the worn stone steps, their progress marked by an eerie echo. The place was but dimly lit by a small window at ground level, and beyond the foot of the steps all that could be seen were a few stone pillars emerging stiffly out of the gloom.

"It is very dark," said Frogs, clearing his throat.

"Our whole life is dark," Stubby reminded him.

Henry was thoughtful.

"I say," he murmured as they sat down on the bottom step, "isn't there a—a rumour that the dungeons are haunted?"

Stubby snorted.

"That old yarn about the Black Monk? Lot of rubbish. Some of the senior chaps tell it to scare the kids."

Frogs swallowed.

"Do not be afraid, Henry," he said. "We will protect you."

"You bet!" growled Stubby, trying to ignore what seemed to be a rustling sound which came
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from the dark void behind the pillars. "In any case," he added, "a Black Monk couldn't be any worse than the Toad!"

"That's true," agreed Henry. "Even though he's got a head and the Black Monk hasn't!"

Tiny currents of air, cold and dank, caressed Stubby's cheek. He decided that silence was dangerous.

"Frogs," he said, abruptly, "you made a beastly mess of things at Sir Philip's this afternoon! Just when we were getting into our stride about Sandy, too."

Sorrowfully the French boy inclined his head.

"I am a fool. I admit it."

"Seems to me we're in a jolly awkward position," Stubby went on. "The Toad's against us. If he's made Head we're for it. Our only chance was to get Sir Philip on our side. Now *he's* probably against us—though he did say something about another visit."

"And Sally, too," Henry put in. "She's no friend of ours."

Their outlook was becoming more jaundiced every moment.

"It is a tragedy!" groaned Frogs.

"Worse than a tragedy," replied Stubby. "There's no justice. Outcasts, that's what we are."

Henry nodded.

"Even Sandy was sarcastic this morning when we fell behind on Ben Caladh!"

"Yes. And if he only knew what we're trying to do for him!"

"*Ach*—every hand is against us!" Frogs threw up his hands in a dramatic gesture. "We are led like sheep to the *abattoir*!"

"Like sheep to the slaughter," Stubby corrected him, with a spasm of irritation. "Look here, Frogs," he went on, as a thought suddenly occurred to him, "got any of that Russian toffee left? The stuff your father sent you."

"*Oui*. But it's in my pocket with the mice. They have been doing the nibble!"

Stubby brushed this objection aside.

"Mice are clean animals," he said. "Come on—let's try it. We need something to sweeten our lives."

Frogs shrugged. Taking out the toffee, he broke it into three portions. Thoughtfully they sampled it.

"Not bad," commented Stubby at last. "Though there is a kind of mousy flavour. Doesn't do it any harm, of course."

All at once Henry leaned forward, pressing the tips of his fingers together.

"I've just thought of something," he said, with unusual animation. "Why don't we form ourselves into a secret society?"

"A what?" returned Stubby, chewing.

"A secret society—like the Underground Movement in France during the War. Sworn to

overthrow the tyrant Todd and make Sandy Headmaster."

Stubby swallowed a mass of crumbling toffee.

"You've got something there!" he acknowledged.

"Ah, *oui*—it is a brilliant idea!" cried Frogs, impulsively. "*Vive la Résistance!* But we must have a name—and a password."

"I've thought of that," returned Henry. "Let's call ourselves 'The Dark Avengers,' the name of the book you're reading, Stubby."

His friend nodded.

"That's it! Bloodthirsty. . . . By Jove," he added, with genuine feeling, "I wish I had your brains!"

"And our password can be *Facta non verba*. Deeds not words," continued Henry.

"The very thing!" said Stubby. "Let's take an oath."

"What is an oath?" inquired Frogs. "If it is the English swearword I cannot pronounce it! I will swear in French."

"Don't be wet! An oath is a kind of—oh, well, it's a thing you *say*, and then you can't go back on it."

"Ah, that is different. What shall we say, Stubby?"

"Just a minute. I'll have to think." In the dim silence a great brain went into action, while its owner meditatively sucked grains of toffee from his teeth. Centuries before, in similar surroundings,

a man with the love of freedom in his heart had pondered the opening phrases of the *Magna Charta*.

Finally Stubby looked up.

"What about this?" he said. "I swear to resist tyranny and give succour to all the poor



What's that? he whispered.

and oppressed. I swear to do all I can to make Sandy Head of Strathmungo.' "

"Excellent!" replied Henry; and Frogs signified eager approval.

"Right-oh, then. Let's join hands and say it together."

But suddenly, as they prepared to take the oath, a snuffling sound came from behind one of the pillars.

Henry grew rigid.

"What's that?" he whispered.

Frogs held his breath. Then he expelled it, making a noise like a steam-brake.

"Can it—can it be the Black Monk?" he said hoarsely.

They waited. The chill stone of the dungeon walls hemmed them in. They could see nothing, there beyond the pillars. The darkness was oppressive, like a heavy blanket.

Then the snuffling sound was repeated.

Stubby knew that this was a crisis. If he failed the others now, his position as leader of the newly-formed society would be an empty sham. . . .

He got up, trying to subdue the pounding of his heart.

"There's something behind that pillar in the corner," he said. "I'll go and see what it is."

Henry gulped.

"Take care!" he breathed.

But Stubby was already half way across the floor, peering into the black shadows. And then, in a tone of immense relief, his voice was uplifted.

"All right, you chaps! Just one of the kids."

He came back to the steps, trailing behind him a small boy of about eleven, whose misery was only too apparent in his red-rimmed eyes. He had a shock of black hair, which fell uncouthly on either side of a pale and frightened face.

Frogs regained his poise.

"Ah, *mon enfant*," he said, in a kindly fashion.
"What is your name?"

"Ferguson. Midge Ferguson."

"New boy?"

"Yes."

"I believe you've been crying!" said Henry.

"No." Midge did his best to keep his voice steady. "I—I wasn't—really!"

Stubby put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"It's pretty rotten coming to school for the first time," he said quietly. "We don't blame you."

"It's—it's not that altogether."

"Well, what is it, then? Someone been annoying you?"

"Y-yes. Up there in the boot-locker."

"A tall chap with a hook nose and a drawly kind of voice?"

"Yes. And another boy with an awful white face."

"I thought so." Stubby glanced meaningly at his friends. "Take my advice, young fellow—keep clear of *them* in future! That's the Honourable Richard Deane, alias Dirty Dick, and his friend, Paleface Lovejoy."

"They are the bulldogs!" supplemented Frogs.
"The worst bulldogs in the whole School!"

"Bullies, you mean," said Stubby.

"Ah, *oui—pardon!* The bullies!"

Henry adjusted his spectacles.

"What exactly occurred?" he inquired.

"They were laughing at me, because—because my father's a missionary in Africa." Midge took a deep breath. "They said I ought to have a black face like a nigger, and they tried to—to put boot-polish on me."

"*Cochons!*" ejaculated Frogs.

"So you ran away and came down here to hide?" said Henry.

Midge nodded. He took a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. But his unhappy snuffling had stopped, and he seemed to be regaining some of his lost morale.

"Are—aren't you afraid of them, too?" he asked.

"No. Why should we be?" replied Stubby.

"They're older—and bigger—"

"My dear young friend," interrupted Henry, "I grant you Dirty Dick and Paleface are our seniors. They're in the Fourth Form while we are only in the Third. But there's such a thing as moral superiority."

Frogs nodded vigorously.

"I am not quite certain what Henry means," he said. "But—I agree with him!"

As his courage flowed back under this friendly treatment, Midge smiled shyly.

For the past few days he had been in a constant state of unhappiness. An insignificant new boy, he had been almost completely ignored by

both masters and fellow-pupils. Loneliness had overwhelmed him, and as he lay in the dark of his dormitory at night, he had longed desperately for his parents. But they were thousands of miles away, on the Gold Coast. He was alone, and nobody seemed to want him. If he made a mistake in his work, masters usually snapped at him. If he spoke to other boys of his own age they told him to "drip off" or declared he was the wettest of the "wet." As for the lordly seniors, they seemed to regard him as something to be trampled underfoot; and his sorrow had been crowned by the active enmity of Deane and Lovejoy.

But now Stubby, Henry and Frogs had shown him that there was kindness in the world after all, and a pulse of joy beat in his throat.

"You—er—you don't mind because my father is a missionary?" he said, hesitantly.

"Mind!" exclaimed Stubby. "Of course not! Missionaries are jolly brave. Anyway, my father is just a farmer. Frogs' father is a lecturer at Glasgow University. And though Henry's is an ambassador"—Stubby grinned—"we don't hold that against him!"

"In other words," explained Frogs, "a man is the goods for all of that."

Henry clicked his tongue.

"Frogs," he said, patiently, "do try to quote correctly—especially in the presence of the

young! You mean—"A man's a man for a' that!" As Robert Burns insisted."

"Forgive me!" The French boy was contrite. "The Scotch language, it is *très difficile*!"

Midge was puzzled by this exchange between the big Third Formers. He could not quite follow it, but he felt instinctively that their intentions towards himself were good. He liked Stubby's freckles and solid good sense; he liked, too, Henry's prim but friendly manner and Frog's stout, cheerful and amusing face. *They're nice and ordinary*, he thought to himself: *I can understand them. . . .*

Stubby interrupted his reflections.

"Did you overhear what we were saying a minute or two ago?"

Midge started.

"About—about 'The Dark Avengers'?"

"Yes."

"I—I did. I meant at first to stay hidden. But when you spoke about helping the poor and oppressed—well—"

"You thought you'd make yourself known and try to join our society?"

Midge nodded.

"But if you don't want me," he hastened to add, "just—just tell me. I shan't give you away or anything."

"You'd better not!" said Stubby, drily. "Look here," he went on, "go and stand over

there—out of earshot. We'll have to discuss your case."

With a humble air, Midge did as he was told.

"You—you won't go away and lock me in?" he ventured from the shadows.

"Don't talk wet!" returned Stubby. Presently, in a quieter tone, he went on: "Well, what do you think, chaps—shall we let him join us?"

"It's a delicate problem," said Henry.

"But he knows all our plans," Stubby pointed out. "And after all, he's one of the poor and oppressed."

Frogs nodded; but Henry, in his scholarly way, was inclined to argue the pros and cons before coming to a decision.

"There's just one thing," he said. "Up to now we've managed to keep clear of Dirty Dick and Paleface. If we try to protect young Ferguson they'll be our deadly enemies."

Stubby frowned.

"That will be everybody against us—the Toad, Sir Philip, Sally, Dirty Dick and Paleface."

"On the other hand," Henry went on, "if we don't help this child we shall be giving up one of the main principles of our society."

A flush of exaltation illumined Frogs' face. Had he possessed a French flag he would have waved it. He flung out his hands in a Gallic gesture of defiance.

"Then let us face them all!" he cried. "*Vive la Résistance!*"

"What's that piece of poetry from *Horatius*?" said Stubby, in a more sober mood. "'And how can man die better than facing fearful odds. . . .'"

"Ah, *oui!*" exclaimed Frogs. "I make the motion—permit young Ferguson to join!"

"What do *you* think Henry?"

"On the whole, I agree with Frogs."

"Good show!" grinned Stubby. He raised his voice. "Come here, Midge!" he ordered.

The small boy came running.

"Am I—am I to be one of 'The Dark Avengers'?" he asked, breathlessly.

Stubby nodded.

"But you'll jolly well have to toe the line and do as you're told!" he said.

"Oh, yes—I promise!"

"Let's take the oath, then—all of us," Stubby went on. "Join hands and repeat after me. . . ."

Four voices took up the chant: *I swear to resist tyranny and give succour to all the poor and oppressed. I swear to do all I can to make Sandy Head of Strathmungo.*

When they had finished, Stubby cleared his throat.

"We'll see what happens now," he said. "Remember the password, Midge—*Facta non verba!*"

CHAPTER FIVE

DIRTY DICK AND PALEFACE

"No, Scott," said Mr Pomphrey, with unusual vigour, "the French Revolution was *not* caused by a whiff of grapeshot."

Like the remainder of the Third, Stubby realised that on this occasion his attempt to pull Simple Simon's leg was doomed to failure.

"Sorry, sir," he replied, resuming his seat.

"You are thinking of Napoleon," the History master went on. "The French Revolution was the outcome of a long period of tyranny by the Kings of France. The poor and oppressed rose in rebellion."

Stubby exchanged glances with Henry and Frogs. Mr. Pomphrey's phrase had stirred a sympathetic chord in his mind. Only two days ago, in the gloomy cellars below the School, he himself had used it in founding their secret society.

"You—you can't blame them, sir, can you?" he ventured. "The poor and oppressed, I mean."

Simple Simon looked over his spectacles. Something in Scott's tone seemed to interest him. He stroked his fluffy head.

"No—you can't blame them," he sighed. "I quite agree. . . . Though there *were* many fine people among the aristocrats," he added, hurriedly. He broke off as a bell clanged in the hall outside. "Ah, well—that is the end of the period," he said, with obvious relief. "You are free now, boys, until Prayers at five. But remember the new rule—you must remain within the grounds."

Stubby, Henry and Frogs wandered off by themselves into the garden, which lay behind the School. Enclosed by a high stone wall, it was sheltered by the pine-woods. Even in September, flowers still bloomed—roses, hollyhocks, dahlias and gladioli—and their fresh perfume sweetened the resinous tang of the pines.

"Simple Simon was a bit narky," observed Stubby, as they followed a gravel path leading to the long, sectional hothouse. "I expect the Toad has been telling him he must keep better discipline."

"Poor Mr. Ponuphrey!" sighed Frogs. "He is like ourselves—how do you say—"

"'Despised and rejected,' " supplied Henry.

"Ah, *oui*—that is what I mean."

But the peace of the garden soon restored their spirits; and a movement in one pocket of his jacket suggested to Frogs an interesting means of passing the time until Prayers.

"Let us have a race," he said. "With my mice. I have been training them."

"Good idea!" replied Stubby. "The best place

will be the cement path—near the hothouse. Got them with you?”

Frogs fumbled in his pocket and displayed three brown mice palpitating on the palm of his hand.

“I have called them England, Scotland and France,” he explained. “You can have England, Henry, Stubby, Scotland. And I—France!”

“They look pretty fit,” said Stubby. “Which is mine?”

“*Ici.*”

“The thin one! Bet you he wins!”

“And this is England in the middle—with the glossy tail.” Frogs smiled at Henry. “But he is a glutton—too fat! Look at La Belle France! Like the greyhound!” •

“That’s why you chose her, I expect,” said Henry shrewdly. “Are they really fast?”

“*Oui*—if there is a piece of cheese at the end of the track! I have kept some from lunch.”

They reached the narrow strip of cement which ran alongside the twinkling glass walls of the hothouse.

“How long shall we make the race?” inquired Henry.

“They can’t smell cheese at more than ten metres,” said Frogs. “That will be enough.”

“Right.” Stubby took command. “This crack in the cement can be the start-line. You send them off, Frogs. If you give us the cheese, Henry and I will go down to the finish—opposite the

end of the hothouse." He took the morsel of cheese and studied it. "A bit mouldy," he remarked. "But it should smell all the better."

He and Henry went off. Ten yards away they halted and stood on either side of the path. Frogs got on his knees and began lining up the competitors. Suddenly he raised his head, with an expression of anxiety.

"One moment please!" he called out. "England is choking on a piece of toffee." He caught the unfortunate mouse by its tail and shook it violently. Then his face cleared. "That is better," he said, putting England down again. "Are you ready, Stubby?"

"Yes. Get a move on!"

Frogs kept the mice in check by firmly pressing the edge of his palm on their tails.

"On the marks," he intoned. "Get set—*go!*"

He jerked up his hand, and the bewildered mice moved slowly forward in the direction of the richly smelling cheese.

"Come on, Scotland!" shouted Stubby; while Henry, discarding for the moment his scholarly reserve, yelled wild encouragement to his own particular champion.

But it was La Belle France which presently took the lead, squirming along the cement in small, irregular bounds. England, fat and heavy and probably upset by its recent shaking, lagged far behind.

"England, you idiot—hurry up!" shrieked Henry; but in vain. This, definitely, was not England's finest hour. "My brute's out of it!" he said finally, in disgust.

"But observe La Belle France!" exulted Frogs, dancing on the path. "She goes like the wind!"

The mice were now four yards from the winning-post. La Belle France maintained her lead, but Scotland was in close attendance. To Stubby it seemed that the nearer his mouse approached the cheese, the faster it moved.

"Come on, Skinny Scotland!" he cried. "I'm gaining on you, Frogs."

The French boy was almost beside himself with excitement. Two yards to go, and only inches between the leading competitors. . . .

"*Vite, vite, vite!*" he shouted, as Scotland's nose gradually drew level with the shoulders of La Belle France. "*F. tei, ma cherie!* Faster!" he implored.

Then, quite unexpectedly and for no apparent reason, Scotland stopped, sat up on his tail and began to preen his whiskers. La Belle France, jumping for the cheese, crossed the finishing line alone.

"I knew it!" yelled Frogs, in triumph. "La Belle France wins!"

Stubby looked at the successful mouse without affection.

"Greedy brute!" he commented and was about to enlarge on the theme when suddenly, from the far end of the hothouse, someone uttered a stricken cry for help.

For a moment the boys stood irresolute. Then Henry pointed to three figures which had appeared on the cement path, some thirty yards away.

"It's Dirty Dick and Paleface!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "Twisting Midge's arm."

Stubby's expression became hard and dour.

"*Facta non verba.*" he said as Frogs hurriedly collected the mice and put them back in his pocket. "Come on!"

The Honourable Richard Deane—otherwise Dirty Dick—was a tall, well-built boy of sixteen, with wavy dark hair and a supercilious Roman nose. His friend, Paleface Lovejoy, was about the same age, but thin and slight—a colourless individual with shifty grey eyes and a fawning manner.

As Stubby and his friends approached, Dirty Dick glanced up. The unpleasant smile with which he had been regarding Midge suddenly vanished.

"Keep out of this, Scott!" he scowled.

Bent forward, his face white and miserable, Midge stifled a sob.

"Stubby!" he gasped. "Help me—"

Dirty Dick gave his arm another twist and struck him in the back with a cruel knee.

"I told you—keep quiet!"

"Look here, Deane," said Stubby, maintaining control, "why are you hurting young Ferguson?"

Paleface Lovejoy took it upon himself to answer.

"None of *your* business," he snarled.

Henry adjusted his spectacles and surveyed Lovejoy as if he were some incredible insect.

"Stubby wasn't addressing you," he said, icily. "Deane," he continued, "answer the question: why are you hurting this child?"

"What's it got to do with you—snivelling little swot!"

Frogs turned brick-red

"Ah-- do not insult Henry!" he exclaimed. "He is my friend--"

"Who cares about the friends of a lousy foreigner!"

"*Parbleu!*" The French boy bunched his fists. "You are the bulldog-- the bully, I mean. You are the pig, the drip of the teapot--"

"Shut up, Frogs!" interrupted Stubby. "Come on, Deane--what's the big idea?"

"Well, if you want to know, I am about to punish Ferguson—for disobedience."

Midge squirmed and tried to break away, but the relentless pressure on his arm continued.

"I—I wasn't disobedient!" he whimpered.

"He refuses to sing us a darkie song," said Paleface, with a nasty smile. "And he should be good at it—being practically a darkie himself!"

Stubby ignored this interruption and looked Deane in the eye. He was three inches shorter than the Fourth Former, but there was no sign of apprehension on his freckled face.

"Let him go!" he said.

Dirty Dick stared.

"What's that?"

"Stubby said—*let him go!*" snapped Henry, in a clear precise voice.

"You can't hurt young Ferguson and get away with it," continued Stubby. "He's a member of—I mean, he's a friend of ours."

Deane kicked Midge again.

"Try and stop me!" he grunted, viciously.

"All right!" Stubby sighed and turned to his friends. "Come on chaps!" he said. "Mind your spectacles, Henry!"

Frogs had been restraining himself with difficulty. Now, thus exhorted, he sprang forward and attacked Dirty Dick. Stubby, baulked of his rightful prey, was taken aback. But he did not hesitate for long. He advanced on Paleface, while Henry, taking off his spectacles and putting them carefully in his pocket, assumed the role of mobile reserve, ready to lend assistance whenever or wherever it was required.

Surprised by Frogs' impetuous assault, Dirty Dick let go his victim's arm.

"Beat it, Midge!" advised Henry; and after a moment of hesitation the small boy ran off

in the direction of the School, mumbling gratitude.

The noise of the fight became louder. Dirty Dick and Frogs were standing toe to toe, exchanging right-hooks and upper-cuts. The stout French boy was probably heavier than Deane, but his shorter reach put him at a certain disadvantage. Stubby, on the other hand, was more than a match for Paleface and was driving him back into a tall clump of hollyhocks.

Suddenly Henry saw Paleface twist to the side and aim a treacherous kick at Stubby's legs. He jumped, caught Paleface's foot as it rose and neatly overturned him into the hollyhocks.

"Good man, Henry!" panted Stubby. Then he glanced down at his fallen foe. "Get up, you skunk! Get up and fight fair!" he growled.

But Paleface had had enough. He cowered back among the rustling fronds, his colourless cheeks paler than ever.

Henry realised that one of their opponents at least was out of action and switched his attention to the other phase of the battle. As he turned, he saw Dirty Dick's fist thudding on Frogs' cheek. But the French boy never flinched. Scowling ferociously, he hit Deane in the solar plexus with a beautiful straight right.

"Take that, you beastly bulldog!" he shouted, as the Fourth Former doubled up. "And that, and that!" he added, crowding in and raining blows on his opponent's face.

"I'll kill you for this!" gasped Dirty Dick, through his teeth. "I'll kill you, de la Tour!"

But Frogs ignored such threats. His Celtic blood was boiling over. With a wild war-whoop



Dirty Dick staggered back.

he resumed his onslaught, and Deane, muttering imprecations, retreated step by step towards the hothouse. . . .

Suddenly Henry realised what was going to happen; but before he could utter a warning Frogs had delivered the *coup de grâce*—a furious

upper-cut. Dirty Dick staggered backwards, struck the side of the hothouse and collapsed, groaning, amid a shower of broken glass.

And as 'The Dark Avengers' savoured uneasily the moment of victory, a voice, chill as sea-fog, came from behind.

"What, may I ask, is the meaning of this?"

Slowly, Stubby, Henry and Frogs turned round. Mr. Hector Todd was standing on the cement path, less than five yards away.

"What is the meaning of this?" he repeated, fingering his watch-chain. "I could hear the noise from my room—and no wonder! The place is like a battlefield. . . Who smashed the hothouse?"

By this time Dirty Dick and Paleface had scrambled to their feet. Dusting his clothes and picking slivers of glass from his hair, Deane made a quick reply.

"They attacked us, sir. De la Tour pushed me against the glass—"

"*Mais non!*" interrupted Frogs, passionately. "It is a falsehood—a—"

"Silence!" snapped the Foad. His cold eye surveyed 'The Dark Avengers.' "Scott, Lucas and de la Tour—as per usual!" he murmured. "You seem to make destruction a positive science. Mr. Pomphrey's window, the bookcase—now this!"

"Honestly, sir, we couldn't help it," said Stubby. "Deane and Lovejoy were—"

"They are trying to make excuses, sir," put in

Paleface, fawning. "Deane and I were having a peaceful walk in the garden when they attacked us."

Dirty Dick nodded.

"They kicked me, sir--when I was down."

"It is a lie!" protested Frogs. "They are the bulldogs--"

"Be quiet, de la Tour!" Mr. Todd's words were like dripping acid. "I am bound to take the word of two senior boys. And in fact all the evidence points to them telling the truth."

"We're not to blame for this, sir," said Stubby, determinedly; but he knew that his denial was useless.

"Would you defy me?" exclaimed the Toad, his mouth twitching. "I've had enough of it! Your pocket-money will be stopped until the damage to the hothouse has been paid for. Besides, Scott--that weekly parcel of jam and sweets sent by your parents from Rhodesia--I intend to withhold it, for a month."

"But, sir--"

"That will do! Now, get back to School, all of you! Prayers are in fifteen minutes from now. . . ."

As the thin, dark-clad figure disappeared behind the hollyhocks, Dirty Dick turned to Stubby. A smile flickered on his swollen lips.

"You see!" he said. "It isn't safe to meddle with Paleface and me!"

Stubby put a hand on Frogs' arm. With superb dignity and restraint 'The Dark Avengers' held their peace and turned away.

CHAPTER SIX

MIDNIGHT MASQUERADE

"TYRANNY and oppression—that's what it is!" growled Stubby, over the edge of his blankets. "We might as well be in a concentration camp!"

"No sweets, no jam, no money!" lamented Frogs.

"It reminds me of Horace," said Henry. "*Magnas inter opes inops*. Penniless in the midst of plenty!"

It was some time after lights-out, and 'The Dark Avengers,' alone in their dormitory, were discussing bitterly the events of the day. A slip of moon rode high, dimly lighting the three beds along the wall, and laying a wand of silver on Henry's pillow near the window.

"The Toad has no right stopping my parcels," Stubby went on. "They—they're *personal*."

"This is Monday. One should have arrived today, shouldn't it?" inquired Henry.

"Yes. I expect he's got it in his study—in one of the cupboards. . . . I am so hungry," added Stubby, "I could jolly well eat a *ton* of toffee!"

"*Et moi aussi!*" muttered Frogs.

Suddenly there were footsteps in the corridor outside.

"Ssh! One of the procs!" warned Stubby.

Then the door opened, and moonlight silhouetted a tall figure on the threshold.

"Stop talking in here!" said the newcomer sharply. "It's after ten o'clock. You should be asleep."

"Sorry, Cranwell," replied Stubby.

"Right-oh, then. . . . Goodnight."

The door closed and the sound of footsteps receded down the corridor.

"Not a bad sort, old Cranwell," said Henry, in a whisper.

"He's fair enough," Stubby conceded. "But if I were eighteen and Captain of the School, I'd jolly well stand up to the Toad more than *he* does. . . . Listen, you chaps," he went on, taking care to speak as quietly as possible, "why should the Toad get the better of us? What's the use of calling ourselves 'The Dark Avengers' if we don't *do* something?"

"What do you mean?" inquired Frogs.

"That parcel—after all it's my property! Let's go down to his study when everyone's asleep and try to find it."

"But Stubby—if we take it away he will suspect."

"I don't mean to take it *away*, Frogs. We'll just open it, empty the tins of sweets into our

pyjama pockets and then wrap it up again. It'll be the same size and shape. He'll never know."

"What about the jam?" asked Henry.

"Doesn't matter so much. The sweets are the main thing. . . . Well—are you on?"

Henry and Frogs did not hesitate. Wherever Stubby led they would willingly follow. They told him so.

"All right," he returned with satisfaction. "Let's lie doggo till after midnight."

The minutes passed slowly. There was a breeze in the woods outside, and the creaking of pine-branches was an ally of weariness. Once or twice Stubby had to speak softly to the others to keep them awake. But when the clock in the Central Tower chimed midnight, they became fully alert at once, ready for the business on hand.

"Let's put on our socks," suggested Stubby, scrambling out of the centre bed. "Slippers might be too noisy."

"Should we wear dressing-gowns?" asked Henry.

"No, we'll do in pyjamas. . . . All set?"

"One moment please," whispered Frogs, a shapeless, ghostly figure beside his locker. "One of my socks is outside in."

Stubby clicked his tongue.

"What does it matter?" he said, irritably.

"It is unlucky to put a sock on outside in. . . . *Voilà!* I am finished now."

The moonlight had gone from the room, and it was in almost complete darkness that Stubby, armed with a torch, opened the door and led the way into the corridor. The long, draughty passage was paved with stone, and they could feel its coldness seeping through their socks. Tip-toeing along, they passed a number of doors on either side, behind which other boys were sleeping. But apart from an occasional muffled snore, and an intermittent flurry of wind, all was silent.

They reached a broad landing which overlooked the central hall.

"Which stair are we going down?" whispered Henry.

"Might as well use the main one," Stubby replied. "The Toad's room is right at the bottom. I'll feel with my foot for the top step. Better not use the torch till we start looking for my parcel."

In single file they edged forward. Presently Stubby hissed back over his shoulder: "Here's the stair. Now, keep touching the bannister and don't barge into me."

Step by step they descended into the black void.

"This is as bad as the dungeons," muttered Henry.

"Not quite. You needn't be afraid of the Black Monk," replied Stubby. "Only the Black Toad!"

They had just negotiated a bend in the stairs, half-way down, when a distant thud came to their ears. They halted and listened.

"It's the door of the toolshed—outside," said Stubby, finally. "Been left open, swinging in the wind."

"Of course!" Henry was relieved. "Why didn't I think of that!"

Carefully they resumed their progress, going down step by step. On one occasion, clumsy as usual, Frogs missed his footing and almost fell. In the end, however, they reached the door of the Toad's study without further mishap.

"Is it locked?" breathed Henry.

Stubby manipulated the brass knob.

"No, we're in luck. Come on in. Leave the door just a little bit open, Frogs, so that we'll hear if anyone comes."

Safely inside, he switched on his torch. It was a cold, utilitarian room, its walls lined with dreary bookcases and cupboards. Linoleum covered the wooden floor. On a broad desk in the centre were various letters and documents and—horrid sight!—a pile of algebra books. Two leather covered arm-chairs stood beside an empty fire-place.

"How bleak!" muttered Henry. "Just like the Toad!"

Frogs nodded.

"You can *smell* the cane—in the desk there!"

But Stubby's mind was fixed unswervingly on the object of their visit. He pointed to a big cupboard near the window.

"He keeps the mail in there. Let's investigate. . . . Gosh," he said, as the high, narrow door creaked open, "it's not locked either! The Toad's certainly a careless blighter! Pity we can't report him to Sir Philip."

Henry rummaged in the recesses of the cupboard.

"Here it is!" he whispered at last, emerging triumphantly with a parcel bearing several Rhodesian stamps. He shook it gently. "Listen! It's full of sweets!"

"Good egg!" grinned Stubby; but as he spoke voices became audible in the hall outside.

"*Parbleu!*" breathed Frogs. "Someone is coming!"

"Quick, Henry!" Stubby retained control of the situation. "Put the parcel back and close the cupboard!" And as his friend hastily complied and steady footsteps approached the study door, he racked his brain to find a solution to their desperate problem.

The murmur of voices crystallised.

"I'm pretty certain I saw a light in here."

"I do hope it's not burglars!"

"We'd better find out. Lucky we stayed so late at Sir Philip's."

Stubby turned to his companions.

"It's Sandy and Simple Simon! Look here, Frogs," he went on, urgently, "pretend you're sleep-walking—Henry and I followed you. It's our only chance."

"Ah, *oui*, I comprehend."

"*Act like blazes!*"

The door opened. There was a click, and the dusty room became flooded with light, revealing the three dishevelled, pyjama-clad figures.

"Good Lord!" muttered Sandy, taken completely by surprise. "What on earth. . ."

Stubby frowned a warning.

"Ssh—quiet, sir!" he said, pointing to Frogs.

Staring into space, the French boy was slowly shuffling in the direction of the door, his rigid arms thrust forward. From his open mouth issued a guttural sound: "*Gug, gug, gug, gug!*"

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Pomphrey. "He's sleep-walking. The outstretched arms, the wild expression in the eyes. . ."

Sandy's mouth twitched.

"Remarkable!" he observed. "Quite remarkable!"

"Please, sir, not so loud," begged Stubby.

Mr. Pomphrey nodded.

"They tell me that if a somnambulist is disturbed it may be very bad for him," he whispered.

Sandy, however, did not appear to share his colleague's anxiety. His smile was somewhat dry.

"Does this kind of thing happen—frequently?" he asked.

"Well—no, sir," admitted Stubby.

"M'm. He got out of bed, I suppose, and you—er—accompanied him down here?"

"Yes, sir."

Frogs had now reached the desk and was moving round it towards the door, followed by his friends. He stumbled on a frayed edge of linoleum but immediately recovered himself.

"Poor boy!" Mr. Pomphrey shook his head. "He may have had a subconscious desire to speak to Mr. Todd."

"*Gug, gug, gug, gug!*" mumbled Frogs.

Sandy fingered his chin.

"What's he saying?" he asked.

"Must be a foreign language, sir," replied Stubby. "Chinese or something."

"I notice you all have your socks on—including the sleep-walker."

"Y-yes, sir."

"Bed socks, I presume?"

"Well—er—"

"Rather unhygienic, I should say!"

By this time Frogs had almost reached the door, his friends in close attendance. Henry's teeth were beginning to chatter.

"Excuse us, sir," said Stubby, over his shoulder. "I think he wants to go upstairs now. We'd better follow him."

"I do hope he isn't suffering!" murmured Mr. Pomphrey, standing aside to let the boys pass. Sandy shrugged.

"I shouldn't worry about him, Simon—not in the meantime, at any rate. He may suffer more—*tomorrow*. . . . By the way, Scott," he went on, "you and your friends are coming for a sail with me tomorrow evening. I'll have a word with you then."

"Er—yes, sir," replied Stubby.

The small procession disappeared into the dark hall. After a moment Mr. Pomphrey shut the door and glanced up at his companion.

"An extraordinary incident!" he remarked, with a puzzled air.

Sandy chuckled.

"You've said it, Simon! But I don't think we should mention it to friend Todd. He has a suspicious mind. Leave me to deal with it."

Back in their dormitory, the boys quickly discarded their socks and got into bed.

"Gosh—that was a near thing!" muttered Stubby. "Though I'm beginning to wish now that we hadn't tried to deceive Sandy."

"But Frogs was magnificent!" said Henry, pulling the blankets up to his chin.

The French boy sighed.

"The strain, it was terrible!" he replied, "I was shaking like the leaf of an aspirin!"

"Not aspirin—*aspen*!" said Stubby.

"Ah, *oui*—pardon!"

"We pulled it off with Simple Simon," Stubby continued thoughtfully. "But I'm not so sure

about Sandy. I didn't like him saying you might suffer *tomorrow*, Frogs."

"It was curious, that! Sometimes I think to myself—what is your Scotch saying?—Sandy is not so green as he looks like the cabbage!"

"You're right there. . . . And the worst of it is, we didn't get the sweets after all!"

"Serve the Toad right if we died of night starvation!" said Henry, with unusual bitterness.

Frogs sighed.

"Think of it! Caramels, *chocolats*, crystallised fruit—wasting away in his beastly cupboard!"

"Shut up, Frogs!" groaned Stubby. "Things are bad enough without you making them worse. . . . Better try a spot of shut-eye," he went on, stifling a melancholy yawn. "I expect we'll find out what's in Sandy's mind when we go sailing with him tomorrow evening."

"On the subject of sailing," murmured Henry, turning over on his side, "a Latin quotation occurs to me. *In malorum mari navigamus*. We are embarked on a sea of troubles."

Sadly they settled themselves to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PUNISHMENT TO FIT THE CRIME

THROUGHOUT the following day, while they laboured to increase their scholastic knowledge, Stubby, Henry and Frogs were worried about what was going to happen in the evening. The more they considered Sandy's cryptic words on the previous night, the more uneasy they became. They had qualms of conscience, too. At heart honest and straightforward, they felt that in some obscure way they had cheated.

Luckily—or unluckily, according to the point of view—the evening was cloudless and sunny, though a stiff little breeze whipped across the Rinns of Laggan and sprinkled white on the waters of the Bay.

As they tramped down from the School and got out a twelve-foot boat at the jetty, neither Sandy nor the boys made any reference to their midnight meeting. And they had been sailing for nearly half-an-hour before the subject developed. Sandy was at the tiller. He had been reminding Frogs that when beating into the wind one must always keep the sail close-hauled, to obviate the

danger of capsizing; and Frogs had been giving practical evidence that he understood the point. Released from his task, the French boy was now sitting against the starboard gun'le, close to the stern, gazing soulfully at the scene before them.

"*C'est magnifique!*" he declared, waving his hands. "The blue sea, the little white horses—the purple mountain above the School!"

Sandy crooked one arm around the tiller and carefully lit his pipe.

"Rather lovely, isn't it?" he agreed.

Squatting at Sandy's feet, Stubby looked up with an odd expression.

"No one could be—er—no one could be sort of angry with anyone out here, could they, sir?" he asked.

The master preserved his gravity.

"Why bring *that* up, Scott?"

"Well—er—we have a confession to make, sir."

"Oh?"

Stubby glanced at his two friends, as if seeking their moral support. They moved closer.

"We thought it over this morning, sir," he went on. "We didn't actually *tell* any lies last night, but. . ." He hesitated.

"Carry on," said Sandy, watching a seagull which hovered high above the mast.

"De la Tour, sir," gulped Stubby, "he wasn't sleep-walking. As a matter of fact, sir, we came

down to get some sweets out of my parcel. You see, Mr. Todd wouldn't let me have it."

Sandy's enigmatic expression did not change.

"And on the spur of the moment, when Mr. Pomphrey and I came in, you did the sleep-walking act?"

"Yes, sir. . . . And by the way, sir, we *didn't* get the sweets."

For a while no one spoke. The bow of the boat went *swish-swash* through the choppy sea, tossing small showers of spray over the group in the stern. The taut sail creaked; and in the rigging the wind made a thrumming, harp-like sound. Far in front, Laggan Point gloomed down on the seething Boulder Reef, while astern the Rinns of Laggan thrust out a long arm to break the force of the breeze.

"We—we're very sorry, sir," said Henry, at last. "It was only today that we sort of realised. . . ."

"That to act a lie is as bad as telling one?" put in Sandy.

"*Oui, monsieur,*" said Frogs, quickly. "That is what we mean. I am the most guilty."

Sandy inspected the bowl of his pipe. Then he squinted for'ard, saw that Laggan Point was bearing too far east and altered course a shade to starboard. To the surprise of the boys, the ghost of a smile appeared on his face.

"I have a confession to make, too," he said,

and his smile grew broader. "Your performance may have impressed Mr. Pomphrey, but it didn't take me in for a second. I knew exactly what you were doing in Mr. Todd's office, because I'd heard about the—er—sweets business, earlier in the day. From Mr. Todd himself."

Stubby was astonished.

"You—you knew all the time, sir?"

"Yes. But I'm very glad indeed that you've confessed. In fact, knowing you all, I rather thought you would—in the end. . . . However, I've heard of more heinous crimes; and as Scott says, it's difficult to be angry about anything, out here in this boat."

Henry took a deep breath.

"You mean you're not going to punish us, sir?"

"Oh, I'm going to punish you all right! I'll tell you how in a minute." Sandy pressed down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. "Don't you think you deserve it?" he asked.

"I—I suppose we do, sir."

"But I've made inquiries, and I'm inclined to believe that you acted under great provocation. Pretty hard doing without sweets, isn't it?"

Frogs nodded, lugubriously.

"Ah, *oui*—that is the trouble, sir."

"Henry says, sir, if we don't get them we'll probably die of night starvation," ventured Stubby, idly playing with a loose rowlock.

Sandy assumed a shocked expression.

"Terrible!" he sympathised. "What a fate! But I've probably saved your lives," he went on, with a sudden twinkle, "because just this evening I managed to persuade Mr. Todd to let Scott have his parcel after all."

Three pairs of eyes almost popped out of their sockets. A slow smile dawned on Henry's ascetic face. Stubby's freckles disappeared under a flush of astonished pleasure, while Frogs hurled himself against the gun'le in sheer delight.

"Steady on, de la Tour!" exclaimed Sandy. "You'll upset us if you don't watch. . . . I heard about the hothouse incident," he continued, "and was able to give Mr. Todd some evidence in your favour. Something young Ferguson told me. You'll find the parcel in your dormitory when you get back."

"Gosh!" said Stubby, simply.

But even in face of this gloriously unexpected news, Henry was mindful of his manners.

"Thank you very muc', sir!" he said, his primness charged by an unusual warmth.

"Of course, I was merely thinking of your health," returned Sandy. "Night starvation is bad. . . . But I haven't finished yet!" he added.

Like a deflating balloon, Frogs' wrapt expression changed.

"Ah, *oui*—the punishment!" he murmured.

"Quite so. . . . It occurred to me last night that

your talents—your acting talents—are rather wasted!”

Stubby gave a hollow, mirthless laugh.

“I—er—don’t quite see, sir.”

“Oh, but I’m sure you do. After last night’s performance I’m convinced that you and your friends could give an excellent turn at the School Concert.”

A look of agony crossed Stubby’s face.

“But, gosh—I mean, sir, no one ever wants to do anything at the School Concert,” he stammered, desperately. “The other chaps just laugh.”

Sandy knocked his pipe out against the tiller.

“Well, you know, the Governors insist on it. And this year I’m responsible for the arrangements. Besides, Lucas at any rate admits that you deserve a certain degree of punishment.”

Stubby saw that Henry and Frogs were expecting a lead from him. As Sandy expertly put the helm over and set a course back to the jetty, he pondered the situation. Above everything he and his friends abhorred the limelight. But there were other factors to be considered. Sandy had proved himself a good friend and a good sport, and it was up to them to reciprocate. . . . Then all at once an entirely new idea occurred to him.

“If we did try something, sir, and if the Concert was a success, would it—er—would it do you a good turn with Sir Philip Andrews?”

Sandy looked surprised.

"Now that you mention it, Scott, I believe it would."

Stubby glanced interrogatively at his friends. They understood his train of thought. Frogs nodded vigorously, while Henry whispered: "*Facta non verba!*"

"In that case, sir," said Stubby, with an air of resolution, "we'll do it."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Sandy, puzzled but obviously gratified. "Thanks a lot! Though the significance of Lucas's Latin tag escapes me. . . . What kind of turn would you like to give?"

"Will you allow us to think it over, sir?" replied Stubby.

"Of course. But let me know in the morning. I'm due at Sir Philip's tomorrow night to make the final arrangements. You can come with me if you like and start rehearsing. Sally Andrews is taking part as well, you know."

It was at that moment that 'The Dark Avengers' suddenly realised what they had let themselves in for. . . .

The next afternoon, following a riding-lesson on the shore, Stubby, Henry and Frogs found themselves free shortly after three o'clock. This often happened on a Wednesday, and the boys of Strathmungo usually spent the time writing letters, tidying their lockers or visiting Sclicffy Mac's shop in the village.

On this particular occasion, however, none of these pastimes appealed to 'The Dark Avengers.' They climbed a knoll on the lower slopes of Ben Caladh and settled down in the heather to consider their mounting tale of ill-fortune.

Lying full-length on his stomach, chin propped on his hands, Stubby surveyed the scene below: the School towers showing above the trees like the superstructure of a battleship; the coloured village far down in the strath; the yellow fields where farmers were busy carting in the corn; the blue sweep of the Bay and the dim islands on the horizon. His expression was serious—even gloomy—despite the tin of Rhodesian toffee which lay well within his reach.

He turned to his friends.

"I wish we hadn't promised to give a turn at that beastly Concert!"

"Too late now," replied Henry philosophically.

"And we are helping Sandy," Frogs reminded him. "You said it yourself."

"Yes, but—oh, gosh, just think of the other chaps laughing at us!"

Henry shrugged.

"*Risus abundat in ore stultorum*. Laughter is frequent in the mouths of fools."

"And there is the lining of silver!" said Frogs, persuasively. "If the Concert is a success, and Sir Philip makes Sandy Head—"

"All right, all right! I suppose that is the way

to look at it," interrupted Stubby irritably. He stretched for the toffee-tin. "Let's have another sweet," he suggested.

Having helped themselves to four each, they carefully removed the cellophane wrappers. Then slowly and luxuriously, they began to chew. Toffee was frequent in the mouths of 'The Dark Avengers.'

"Well, what are we going to *do* at the Concert?" inquired Stubby.

Like a sailor with a quid of tobacco, Henry shifted a mass of toffee into his right cheek,

"I've been thinking," he said. "Remember that poem of Sir Walter Scott's—*Jock o' Hazeldean*? Sandy was reading it to us just the other day."

Frogs nodded, cheerfully.

"Ah, *oui*, so romantic!"

"What about it?" demanded Stubby.

"We might do a play with the same plot," said Henry. "I could easily write it, in a couple of hours."

The others gazed at him in ruminative astonishment. Finally Stubby swallowed what remained of his mouthful of toffee.

"But how—I mean, what parts could we play?" he asked.

"Well, I'd be the girl's father--and Frogs the rich foreigner I wanted her to marry. But—how does it go?—'aye she loot the tears doon fa' for Jock o' Hazeldean.' In the last act—just as the

girl is being married to Frogs—you'd come galloping in, Stubby, as Jock o' Hazeldean, and carry her away."

Stubby said nothing for a long time. Then he turned over on one side, sat up and ran his fingers through his untidy red hair.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "I wish I had your brains, Henry! I wouldn't need to speak at all, really," he continued, with mounting enthusiasm. "I'd just come galloping in on my horse, get hold of the girl and gallop off again."

"Not exactly," replied his friend. "There'd be a bit showing you all sad and gloomy and sort of making up your mind to clope with her."

Stubby frowned.

"Cut that out if you can," he said, gruffly. "Wait a minute, though—who's going to be the girl? Bet you never thought of that!"

"I did. We'll get Midge Ferguson. He's small and slim and could be dressed up to look just like a girl."

Frogs nodded.

"*C'est une idée magnifique!*" he declared.

But Stubby was unconvinced.

"Can he *act*?" he said.

"That's not important," returned Henry, with an airy gesture. "Girls only need to look pretty on the stage."

"There's that," conceded Stubby.

"All he'll have to do is 'loot the tears doon

fa.' 'It's you and Frogs and I that'll have to do the real acting."

Stubby pondered.

"Look here," he said, shaking the tin, "let's have *five* sweets this time, or we'll never get them finished. . . . I expect it'll be all right me taking a horse on the stage?" he inquired presently, through a gluttinous cheekful of toffee.

"I don't see why not," returned Henry. "All the School horses are pretty quiet—and there's a big door opening on to the platform at the back of the hall."

"Unfortunately you will not be able to gallop very fast," said Frogs

"But you can come in at a trot," Henry pointed out. "It'll be a jolly fine spectacle—like *Oklahoma!*"

The hint of a smile appeared on Stubby's face.

"M'm—I believe I *will* look pretty well," he admitted. With sudden energy, he jumped to his feet. "Come on," he said. "Frogs and I will get hold of Midge and tell him he's got to come to Sir Philip's house tonight. You can go and write the play, Henry. . . . I bet Sandy will be pleased!" he added, with a self-satisfied air.

When 'The Dark Avengers,' accompanied by Sandy and their adherent Midge, arrived at Strathmungo Lodge, they were a little worried about the kind of reception they would get from Sir Philip. But the Chairman of the Board of Governors put them at their ease at once.

"Ah, come in!" he exclaimed, heartily. "Hullo, Sandy. Glad you brought these young rascals along. This is the newcomer, eh? How d'you like Strathmungo, Ferguson?"

In the past day or two, thanks to his new allies, Midge had regained most of his shattered confidence. His thick black hair was neatly plastered down with some of Henry's *groise*.

"Very well, sir," he replied, smiling. "'The Dark Avengers'—I mean, Stubby and Henry and Frogs are looking after me now."

"Good. Good." Sir Philip ushered them into the wide hall. "As a matter of fact," he went on, turning confidentially to Stubby and his friends, "when we heard you were coming Sally and I took care to lock up what's left of the good china." He chuckled. "But Mr. Beach doesn't know about that, does he?"

Sandy was puzzled by the hollow laughter of the Third Formers.

"Afraid I don't," he admitted.

Sir Philip patted him on the back.

"Ah, well—never mind! Good thing masters don't know everything—eh, Scott? And in any case, we have completely forgiven you." He led them into the drawing-room. "Ah, there you are, Sally," he said, with a smile. "'The actors are come hither'!"

They sat round the blazing fire. Sally was looking quite grown-up in a dark brown frock,

light nylon stockings and shoes with fairly pronounced heels. Much to their surprise and satisfaction, she showed no signs of enmity towards 'The Dark Avengers,' though at first she regarded Frogs with suspicion.

"Have you still got those mice?" she asked.

He nodded.

"But not here!" he hastened to add. "I leave them sleeping in my pyjama-case"

She sighed with relief. Her father chuckled.

"We all have our own peculiar hobbies, I suppose. . . . Now, Sandy," he went on, "you say the boys are keen to do something at the Concert?"

The young English master smiled.

"Well perhaps not *keen* exactly."

"We don't want to let Mr Beach down, sir," explained Henry, quick to improve the shining hour.

Sir Philip was delighted.

"Very good indeed!" he said. "A fine example of the Strathmungo spirit . . . Mr. Beach tells me you're thinking of doing a play. About Jock o' Hazeldean."

"Henry wrote it, sir," replied Stubby. "Jolly clever!"

Frogs waved his hands.

"Ah, *monsieur*—he is another Shakespeare! A chip of the ancient block—"

"Don't talk wet!" interrupted the embarrassed author.

"I'm to be a girl," put in Midge, shyly, "and 'loot the tears doon fa'."

"Well done!" boomed Sir Philip. "You know, Sandy, someone tried to tell me the other day that the younger generation has no enthusiasm. Rubbish, sir! Wish I could introduce him to these boys!"

Sandy nodded—a trifle vaguely. Truth to tell, he was puzzled by the outcome of events. That Scott, Lucas and de la Tour—and especially Scott—should display an interest in amateur theatricals was beyond his comprehension. They were certainly showing enthusiasm, an enthusiasm generally directed to other, less innocent channels; but Sandy shrewdly suspected that drama for drama's sake was not its real object and that a more complicated purpose lay behind it all. He was too modest to realise that this purpose was the sworn intention of 'The Dark Avengers' to do the Toad in the eye and make himself Head of Strathmungo.

Suddenly Sally leaned forward.

"Henry," she said, pleading prettily, "couldn't I be the girl?"

He was visibly shaken.

"Well—er—I don't know," he stammered.

"Oh—*please!*" she went on with her most charming smile. "Midge could be my little brother or something. . . . I know! He could go and tell Stubby that I was being married. That

would make Stubby angry, and he'd come to my rescue at once. With his sword."

"It's an idea," said Sandy. "Much better to have a real girl."

"What does the playwright say?" asked Sir Philip.

Henry was cornered.

"I suppose it would be all right, sir," he replied, without enthusiasm. "I could put in another scene."

"But I shouldn't be able to lift Sally on to my horse," objected Stubby, quickly. "I mean, she's a girl. I might tear her frock."

Sir Philip's bushy eyebrows rose.

"Good heavens! You're not bringing a *horse* on to the stage?"

"Yes, sir. We—er—"

"Oh, splendid!" cried Sally. "Don't worry about lifting me, Stubby. I can easily climb up behind you."

"Sandy," said Sir Philip, ignoring side-issues, "are you allowing them to use a horse?"

"First I've heard of it."

"It's a good idea. Granted. But would it be safe?"

Sandy shrugged.

"The School horses are all quiet as lambs.

"Oh, yes, Dad!" cajoled Sally. "I'd *love* to be carried away on a horse!"

"If you fell off," remarked Midge, unexpectedly, "you might break your leg."

Sally was about to scoff at this suggestion, but her father intervened.

"There's something in what young Ferguson says. And come to think of it, Mr. Todd would be pretty sure to object in any case. Let's decide that you just walk on, Scott—flourishing your sword, perhaps, but on your own two feet."

"Very well, sir," sighed Stubby.

"I think you're wise, sir," agreed Sandy. "Though in many ways it's a pity," he added, with an involuntary chuckle.

Sir Philip smiled.

"I know. . . . However—that's arranged," he continued, briskly. "No livestock on the stage. And Sally plays the girl with Ferguson as her young brother. Got your script there, Lucas?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do a spot of revision, then, and afterwards you can all give it a quick run over. Mr. Beach and I will promise not to interfere any more with the characters or their speeches."

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT SCLIFFY MAC'S

FOR a week, in spite of their disappointment over the horse, 'The Dark Avengers' dutifully carried out rehearsals for Henry's play. These generally took place at Strathmungo Lodge; but in the privacy of their dormitory Henry and Frogs put in a good deal of extra work on Stubby, who was proving a somewhat stiff and unromantic Jock o' Hazeldean.

Stubby was keenly aware of his own shortcomings and would have resigned the part had he not been convinced that by doing so he would be letting Sandy down. Besides, he possessed a dourness of character which impelled him to see a job through to the end.

Henry and Frogs, on the other hand, were surprisingly good actors, while both Sally and Midge were competent enough in their respective parts. True to his promise, Sir Philip suggested no further alterations in Henry's script, though once or twice, as they declaimed their lines, 'The Dark Avengers' were puzzled to account for a quick half-concealed smile which passed between him and Sandy.

The date of the Concert drew near.

At all hours, quartettes and choirs made up of blushing First and Second Formers could be heard practising. Embarrassed seniors rehearsed piano solos and recitations. People with no responsibility for the entertainment went about with a superior air and lost no opportunity of heaping calumny on their less fortunate fellows. Several attempts were made to mock 'The Dark Avengers'; but as this invariably led to serious trouble for the mockers, Stubby, Henry, Frogs and Midge were, in the end, left severely alone. Indeed, it began to be whispered in the corridors that Lucas's adaptation of *Jock o' Hazeldean* was going to be a 'whizzer.' According to a knowledgeable clique in the Fourth, James Bridie and J. B. Priestley simply weren't in it compared with the new Strathmungo dramatist.

Henry himself, however, was dissatisfied with his play. Though it was dramatic enough, he had the feeling that something was lacking. But in spite of this, he worked as hard as he could under Sandy's guidance to make its performance a success.

The day before the Concert was a Wednesday. That afternoon, instead of riding, the Third Form went climbing with Sandy on Ben Caladh. At half-past three, sweating profusely, they arrived back at School; and after a shower, Stubby suggested to his friends that they should

go down to the village and slake their burning thirst at Scliffy Mac's. Henry and Frogs heartily agreed.

Scliffy Mac's was a small, scrupulously clean little shop, redolent of soap, newsprint and confectionery. A number of glass-topped tables stood in a corner opposite the counter, and for years it had been the favourite haunt of thirsty schoolboys. As 'The Dark Avengers' came in and sat down the proprietor himself emerged from the back premises, wiping traces of afternoon tea from his drooping walrus moustache.

He was a tall man, stooped a little, with a completely bald head and slightly protruding eyes. His nick-name was due to a stiff right leg, shattered at Mons in the first World War, which he dragged awkwardly as he walked. He was a well-known character among the boys of Strathmungo, always obliging and ready to crack a joke, but a stern disciplinarian when the occasion warranted. Though he would never admit it, Stubby, Henry and Frogs were among his favourites. They were generally quiet and well behaved—in his shop, at any rate; and their complete lack of snobbishness or 'side' appealed to him as an independent Highlander.

He greeted them warmly.

"Well, well, boys—it's a long time since I've been seeing you in the shop. How are you keeping? Working hard at your lessons?"

Henry grinned.

"As Cicero says—*Labor callum obducit dolori*. Work makes us forget our sorrows."

Like many another humble Scot, Sciliffy Mac had received a liberal education and could translate the Latin tag without assistance.

"Man, you're the clever one!" he chuckled, appreciatively. "But what can I do for you?" he went on, in a more business-like tone. "You're all terrible hot-looking!"

Stubby made a wry face.

"We're just back from climbing Ben Caladh—with Mr. Beach."

"Och, no wonder you're tired! Those long legs of his. . . . It'll be lemonade you're wanting?"

"Yes, please. Could we have one of your big bottles? You know—the two-pint size."

"Well, now—it's not often I'm getting such big bottles. But just you wait. I'll have a look in the back shop."

The old man shuffled off. Frogs sighed.

"Phew—I *am* thirsty! he exclaimed.

"You'll be thirstier tomorrow night," replied Stubby, darkly.

"*Pourquoi?*"

"The Concert!"

"Ah, *oui*: the Concert."

"Just think of it—only another twenty-four hours!"

"Well, never mind, Stubby." Henry was

soothing. "The rehearsals have been pretty good. And it was jolly decent of Sandy and Sir Philip not to interfere with my script—except the bit about the horse. . . . Frogs is terrific as the French Count."

"That's what I'm worried about," replied Stubby. "You and Frogs are great. So is Sally Andrews—and even Midge, though he hasn't much to do. But I'm *hopeless!*"

"Oh, you're not bad."

"I'll let you down, Henry. Sure as fate."

Frogs patted him on the shoulder.

"You are too modest, *mon vieux*. Like the daisy of Robert Burns—'wee, modest, crimson-tippit floo'er—' "

"Oh, shut up! If only I had the horse. Then my acting wouldn't be so important."

Scliffy Mac returned with a huge bottle and three glasses. He put them on the table.

"You'll have to be careful when you're taking out that cork," he said "It's terrible fizzy stuff."

Henry, who always acted as treasurer, paid for the order, while Stubby wrestled with the cork. After a moment it came out with a terrific bang, leaped high in the air and eventually disappeared under the counter. Liquid surged violently. Hurriedly Stubby filled the glasses, but a fair quantity of lemonade was still left in the bottle.

"There you are—just what I was warning you

about," chuckled Sciffy Mac. "It's terrible fizzy. And now you've lost the cork."

"That's all right," replied Stubby calmly. "I'll stick my thumb in the top. That ought to keep the fizz in."

"Good enough. But remember—the longer you are keeping your thumb in, the fizzier it will get. It's a shower-bath you'll be having if you're not careful!" He smoothed his moustache, smiled and turned away. "See and enjoy yourselves," he said, going back to his interrupted tea.

For some time 'The Dark Avengers' were silent, gratefully absorbing their drinks. A cool breeze entered by the open window. The village outside was quiet, except for an occasional cart rumbling along the main street and the distant shouts of children playing on the green. The mental and physical heat engendered by their struggle with Ben Caladh slowly subsided.

At last, however, Stubby's forehead creased into a thoughtful frown.

"Look here," he said, putting down his glass but keeping his thumb carefully in the bottle, "Sandy was pretty keen on the horse, wasn't he?"

Frogs nodded.

"He said it was a pity we couldn't use one."

"If it hadn't been for Sir Philip," said Henry, "I don't believe he'd have objected at all."

"And Sir Philip only objected because—well, because he's scared of the Toad. . . . Listen,"

Stubby went on, "why not let's give Sandy a surprise? I bet he'd be jolly pleased if I did come in on horseback! And so would Sir Philip."

"But *Monsieur Todd*," began Frogs, with a worried expression.

"He's never been asked," Stubby reminded him. "I vote we use old Bess," he went on, firmly. "She's quiet and accustomed to crowds—an old police horse."

Henry was doubtful.

"Sandy says she gets wild if she hears a police whistle."

"Who's going to blow a police whistle at a School Concert!" replied Stubby, with lofty scorn. "Well, are you on?" he dared them; and as he moved his thumb slightly, a hiss echoed through the shop indicating the tremendous pressure building up inside the bottle.

"All right, count me in," agreed Henry, stifling a sigh, while Frogs bowed his head submissively and murmured: "Whatever you say, Stubby."

Their companion looked pleased.

"That's settled then. I come in on horseback in the last act, and—" He broke off. "I say," he exclaimed, turning quickly to the window, "did I hear someone outside?"

He received an answer almost at once. The door of the shop was thrust open.

"Look out," whispered Henry. "It's Dirty .

Dick and Paleface. Bet you they've been listening to what we were saying. The window's open."

It was obvious that Deane and Lovejoy were out for trouble. Half-concealed triumph showed on their faces. They crossed the floor and looked down at "The Dark Avengers."

Paleface curled his lip.

"Don't let's sit beside them Dick. . . . Actors!"

Dirty Dick laughed unpleasantly.

"You've said it! Dressing up and playing on the stage with little girls!"

"We're only trying to help Sandy," Henry explained, in an attempt at appeasement. "I didn't *want* to write a. . . ."

"Hark to the child!" Paleface sniggered. "What do you think you are? Another Bernard Shaw? I bet your play stinks!"

Frogs had been growing redder and redder in the face. Now he could no longer contain himself.

"Ah—shut down!" he cried. "Do not insult Henry! Remove yourselves!"

"We will—presently," replied Paleface. "We are rather particular about the company we keep."

Stubby had been sitting motionless and silent. His unruffled, contemptuous bearing caused in Dirty Dick a surge of thwarted annoyance.

"But before we go," he snarled, "we'll have some of that lemonade in Scott's bottle."

Stubby's eyes did not waver.

"Go and buy some for yourself. You needn't think you can bully us!"

Dirty Dick swung a threatening hand.

"Come on—fill out two glasses!" he ordered.

"No fear!"

"Then we'll jolly well make you!" Deane's long arm shot out, pinning Stubby against the wall of the shop. "Now then, cough up, or else—"

To the astonishment of his friends—and before they could make a move to help him—Stubby's resistance seemed to melt away.

"All right!" he panted. "I'll give you as much as you want."

With a smug and satisfied smile the Fourth Former released his victim. Stubby raised the bottle. Then, without warning, he took out his thumb. Like a volcano in eruption, lemonade shot upwards and splashed full on Deane's mouth and nose.

As he realised that his friend's air of submission had only been a sham, Deane grinned hugely.

"The shower-bath!" he exulted. "Magnificent, Stubby! Ah—*c'est drole!*"

Dirty Dick had been taken completely by surprise. He choked and coughed and clawed at his collar, vainly trying to prevent the lemonade from running down his neck. Henry uttered a well-bred laugh. It only served to fan Deane's rage.

"Gosh! Phew! Come on, Paleface," he gasped. "Scrag 'em!"

But before battle could be joined a shuffling sound came from the back of the shop. With surprising agility Scliffy Mac approached the



Then without warning he took out his thumb.

table. He caught Dirty Dick and Paleface, each by the scruff of the neck, and pulled them back.

"Now, now, young gentlemen --that'll do."

Deane squirmed and tried to break away.

"Let me get at Scott!" he muttered.

"Not in *my* shop! No, no!" Scliffy Mac retained his grip. "You may be the son of a Lord or Duke down in England, but you are not of much

account up here. . . . You and your friends had better be going, Mr. Stubby," he went on, with a friendly smile. "The other two will bide here till they are learning how to behave themselves."

'The Dark Avengers' rose with dignity. As they reached the door Dirty Dick shouted after them: "You'll pay for this! Just wait till tomorrow night—at the Concert!"

CHAPTER NINE

THE PLAY'S THE THING

AT Strathmungo's annual Concert, the audience was made up of all the boys who had no part to fulfil on the stage, the staff (who sat in front, immediately below the platform) and a variety of people—shopkeepers, farmers, lairds and other notabilities—invited from the village and surrounding countryside.

The grown-ups always gave the performers a polite hearing and equally polite applause; but there was a tradition that the schoolboy part of the audience should be allowed to have its fun—within reason, of course, and subject to the mood of the Headmaster.

On this occasion Mr. Hector Todd's presence in the middle of the front row had a damping effect on his pupils, and there was little noise until Sandy appeared on the curtained stage to announce the *pièce de résistance* of the evening's entertainment. Then a buzz of anticipation went through the warm, packed hall.

"Now we come to the last item on our programme," he said, with a smile. "A play in three acts adapted from Sir Walter Scott's famous

poem, *Jock o' Hazeldean*. It has been written by Lucas of the Third. (*Loud applause and shouts of "Good old Henry!"*) Taking part are Sally Andrews as the Lady Jean; Ferguson of the First as her young brother, Alastair; Lucas himself as their father, the Duke of Oban; de la Tour of the Third as the Count de Tour from France; and Scott, also of the Third, as Jock o' Hazeldean. (*Renewed applause and a voice: "Come on, Stubby—do your stuff!"*)

"This effort," continued Sandy, "remains in its original form, because when grown-ups start interfering things are apt to go slow. When the curtains are drawn back the stage will be just as it was—with piano, chairs and so on—but you must imagine it to be a room in an eighteenth century Scots Castle the country seat of the Duke of Oban. . . . Right, let's begin."

As the curtains were jerked apart, a hush fell on the audience. On the left of the stage was Sally, dressed in a long, diaphanous robe, which, according to Sciffy Mac's wife in the third row, had been made out of a muslin curtain. She was gazing tearfully in the direction of the audience, while behind her, in ill-fitting doublet and trews, stood Henry, his face and hair powdered white.

The play began.

DUKE OF OBAN: Ah, my dear Jean—why weep—
est thou here at the window,

looking out over the sparkling
tide of the Sound of Mull?

LADY JEAN: (*stifling her sobs*) It is nothing,
Father

DUKE OF OBAN: Thou shouldst not weep, my
daughter. Tomorrow is thy
wedding day, and this evening
—ere the shadows of night fall
a—athwirt—athwart, I mean—
athwart yonder purple moun-
tain—your future husband, the
Count de Tour, will be here by
your side.

LADY JEAN: (*sobbing*) Father, I have no de-
sire to marry the Count de
Tour.

DUKE OF OBAN: *What!* He is famous—he is rich.
A chain of gold ye shall not
lack, nor braid to bind your
hair. . . Besides, the Count will
pay my debts!

LADY JEAN: I am forced to obey your
commands, Father, but. . .

DUKE OF OBAN: (*sternly*) But what?

LADY JEAN: I would fain marry another.

DUKE OF OBAN: Another! Who? What is his
name?

LADY JEAN: Our neighbour—Jock o' Hazel-
dean.

. DUKE OF OBAN: (*beside himself*) What! That

varlet! That scallywag! Without a penny in his sporran!

LADY JEAN: (*with more spirit*) He is young and handsome—not like the Count, who is fat and greasy.

DUKE OF OBAN: Be silent! You will marry the Count—tomorrow. . . Ah—someone knocks! This will be the Count de Tour in person. Come in!

At this point a door opened on the right. In strode Frogs, an impressive, padded figure in coat and knee-breeches of pale blue silk. His appearance was greeted by a storm of boos, hisses and groans; but he remained entirely at ease. Stroking an enormous, up-curling moustache, he bowed and uttered a sneering laugh.

COUNT DE TOUR: Ah—the happy family party! *Bon soir*, Duke of Oban. *Bon soir*, my sweetheart.

DUKE OF OBAN: My friend, Count de Tour—welcome to Oban Castle! . . . Now, I must leave you. Doubtless you and my daughter have much to say to each other.

COUNT DE TOUR: Doubtless! Doubtless!

DUKE OF OBAN: Good evening, then.

Henry made his exit, which was somewhat marred by his stumbling over a mat at the door.

Sally remained staring into space, while Frogs, leering at the audience, sidled closer.

COUNT DE TOUR: At last—alone! Let me kiss your hand.

LADY JEAN: (*moving away and lifting her head proudly*) No—never! Never will those foul lips sully me by their touch!

(*Terrific applause. Shouts of "Hear, hear!"*)

COUNT DE TOUR: But why? We are betrothed.

LADY JEAN: I do not love you!

COUNT DE TOUR (*laughing cynically*) You will get over that! I am rich—the most powerful noble in France.

LADY JEAN: What do I care for riches? I seek for true love!

(*Wild applause*)

COUNT DE TOUR: (*snarling and stroking his moustache*) Ah, so you'd double-cross me, eh? Huh—the wedding is arranged. Tomorrow you will be mine! Unless you wish that your father becomes a pauper.

(*Boos and cries of "Shame on you, Frogs!"*)

LADY JEAN: (*sobbing*) Oh, dear!

COUNT DE TOUR: In the meantime, I withdraw. . . . (*sneering*) Goodnight.

LADY JEAN: (*left by herself on the stage*) Oh, Jock o' Hazeldean—little dost thou know of my misery!

With a rush the curtains closed on the first act. The audience clapped and stamped, obviously delighted. Even Mr. Todd's face was less sour than usual, while Sir Philip boomed to a neighbour: "Gad, sir—I told you. Completely new and original. Credit to all concerned, don't you think?"

Behind the scenes Frogs welcomed Sally as she came off.

"*Très bien!*" he cried, with enthusiasm. "You spoke that curtain line like a great actress!"

"Oh, Frogs, I was so nervous at first! But you were wonderful—wasn't he, Mr. Beach?"

Sandy chuckled.

"He certainly was! And Henry, too. I didn't need to prompt them once. Now I must see if the lights are dimmed for the next act," he said moving off.

With Midge silent and uneasy by his side, Stubby gloomed in a corner.

"All very well for you people!" he muttered. "You've made a start."

Sally squeezed his arm.

"Don't worry! You'll be all right."

"Courage, *mon vieux!*" Frogs waved his hands. "Courage in the hour of danger!"

"Remember what's going to happen in the last act!" said Henry, in a conspiratorial whisper. "But it's time you were on the stage," he continued. "Midge, you go and stand behind the sidedoor."

In front, Sandy was announcing the second act.

"This takes place in the house of Jock o' Hazeldean. It is late at night, fairly dark, and Jock is asleep on his pallet of straw."

The stage was revealed in semi-darkness. On an old mattress, right, Stubby lay facing the hall. He was dressed in a brown doublet, riding-breeches and a brown hat with a jaunty feather. His eyes were shut and tremendous snores issued from his half-open mouth. The audience was fascinated.

A knock sounded at the side door. Jock o' Hazeldean was awake at once. He sat up on his elbow, a look of intense concentration on his freckled face.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN.

Eh? What is that?

ALASTAIR:

(calling, outside door) Stubby—I mean, Jock—are you awake?

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN:

Yes, yes. Who is there?

ALASTAIR:

It is I—Alastair—brother of the Lady Jean.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN:

(to himself) I' faith, 'tis passing strange! *(louder)* Enter, my young friend.

His young friend came on shyly, a nervous tongue-tip showing at one corner of his mouth. His top-boots were rather too big for him, and he

shuffled rather than walked. Stubby got to his feet. For a moment the pair stood facing one another. There was an awful silence, as Stubby vainly searched his mind for the continuation of his speech. Then the voice of Sandy, prompting, came from the wings, and the play went on.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN: You look pale and weary. What ever is the matter?

ALASTAIR: (*gulping*) I have ridden hard and fast from Oban Castle to tell you the bitter news. Tomorrow my sister is to be married to the Count de Tour. And she wants to marry you!

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN: Gosh! I—I mean—er—

(*Sandy's voice, prompting: "Ah, little did I think her heart was set on . . ."*)

(*whispering*) Yes, sir. (*in a rush*) Ah, little did I think her heart was set on me!

ALASTAIR: She stands by her window and loots the tears doon fa'.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN: Zounds! I must *do* something! What do you suggest?

ALASTAIR: Elope with her, Jock. Over the Border and awa'. Even though

you are penniless, you will make her happy.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN:

But I am not penniless. They have found a coal-mine beneath my estate. I am a millionaire!

ALASTAIR:

All the more reason why you should elope with my sister! You can pay my father's debts.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN:

You bet! I mean—assuredly, my dear Alastair.

ALASTAIR:

Then I will return and tell my sister that you will come.

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN:

Yes. Tomorrow. Thank you for your visit at this late hour. I—er—I—er—

(*Sandy's voice, prompting: "I owe you an undying debt of gratitude!"*)

(*whispering*) Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. (*declaming*) I owe you an ungratifying dye of debtitude! Oh, gosh—I mean, I owe you an undebting grat of—an undying grit of—

(*Subdued laughter and shouts of "Go it, Stubby!"*)
Sandy's voice, urgently: "That'll do, Scott. Go on, Ferguson!")

ALASTAIR: (*gulping*) Then farewell, brave Jock!

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN: (*recovering*) Er—farewell, Alastair. I am somewhat distressed at the moment. (*slowly, emphatically*) But tomorrow on my faithful horse Black Bess I will come!

As the swishing curtains concealed Stubby and Midge, a gale of cheering broke out among the audience. If the grown-ups were a trifle sorry for Stubby, his fellow-pupils had no such qualms. They were thoroughly enjoying his discomfiture, which, in their view, added greatly to the success of the play.

Back-stage, Stubby confronted Sandy. His expression was desperate but dour.

"I—I muffed it," he said. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't worry, Scott." Sandy patted his shoulder.

"Midge was jolly good," said Henry cheerfully.

"As to the manner born!" supplemented Frogs.

Midge blushed.

"I quite agree," smiled Sandy. "But look here, Scott," he went on, "that last line of yours—'*On my faithful horse Black Bess I will come*'—it wasn't in the script. '*With my faithful sword*,' it should have been."

Stubby looked embarrassed.

"That was the line in the—er—original play, sir."

"M'm. Slight mental aberration, eh?. . . Well—get ready for the last act everybody." Sally pirouetted in her muslin robe and tried to contain her excitement. "And do your very best," Sandy continued. "In spite of everything, I think the play is a winner. I'll go and make the announcement."

As he left them, Henry caught Stubby's wrist.

"Old Bess is outside," he whispered, hurriedly. "Tied up to the wall. Frogs and I went out and got her during the second act. Midge will open the back door and you'll trot right on to the stage."

Stubby brightened.

"Okay. Gosh—this should be good!"

"A knock-in!" chortled Frogs.

Sally was puzzled.

"Stubby—what *are* you talking about?" she asked.

"I'm using a real horse," he told her, hitching up his riding-breeches like a cowboy. "A terrific surprise for Sandy and your father. They thought it would be dangerous, but we'll be all right with old Bess. And none of the lines need to be changed."

"Oh—lovely!"

"So be ready to climb up behind me."

"Yes!" Sally clapped her hands and danced. "This is *marvellous!*" she exclaimed.

Henry grinned.

"Come on then, Sally—you and Frogs. Time we were in our places. See you later, Stubby."

"You certainly will!"

Meanwhile, out in front, Sandy was making his final speech,

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the last act of the drama. The wedding festivities are in progress, and the act begins with the Count de Tour, alone in the hall of Oban Castle, waiting for the bride and her father to arrive."

The curtains were drawn back. The audience saw Frogs in the middle of the stage, the brilliant lights dancing on his pale-blue costume. He twirled his huge black moustache and gave a sneering laugh.

COUNT DE TOUR: Huh! Soon the Lady Jean will be mine! (*snarling*) I will tame her proud spirit!

(*Hisses and groans*)

Huh—nothing can save her now!

(*Loud boos. A voice: "That's what you think, Frogs!"*)

(*in stage whisper*) Ah—here she comes with her silly old father.

The sidedoor opened to admit Henry, who had unfortunately forgotten on this occasion to take off his glasses, with the muslin-enveloped Sally clinging to his arm.

DUKE OF OBAN: Good morning, Count de Tour.

The sun shines for your wedding day.

COUNT DE TOUR: *Bon jour*, Duke! Ah, my bride—you are beautiful!

LADY JEAN: (*with a faraway smile*) Yes! I am very happy today.

COUNT DE TOUR: Happy? But last night—

LADY JEAN: (*interrupting ecstatically*) I am going to marry the man I love!

DUKE OF OBAN: You see, my dear Count, she has come to appreciate your good qualities. She is a most dutiful daughter.

COUNT DE TOUR: (*thoughtfully twirling his moustache*) This is remarkable!

LADY JEAN: It is a miracle!

DUKE OF OBAN: Well—now we await the parson.
(*A loud knocking at the back of the stage*)

That must be the parson now.
But why is he coming in at the tradesmen's entrance? (*loudly*) No matter—throw wide the portal!

Dramatically the double doors were flung back. On to the stage trotted an enormous black horse, with Stubby clinging to the reins and yelling: "Hi-yup!" It was a tremendous moment, and the boys in the audience shouted their heartfelt appreciation. But from the wings Sandy glanced across at Sir Philip Andrews and Mr. Hector Todd. Despair entered his heart as

he saw their expressions become hard and grim.

In the meantime, with Bess standing calmly on the platform, tossing her head slightly as if aware of her own importance, the play continued.

DUKE OF OBAN: Great Heavens! 'Tis Jock o' Hazeldean!

LADY JEAN: Oh, Jock, Jock!

COUNT DE TOUR And what, may I ask, is the meaning of this?

JOCK O'

HAZELDEAN: (*full of confidence at last*) Out of my way, foreign dog! Out of my way, or my horse will trample you underfoot! Come, Sally—Jean, I mean. We will fly together!

(*Roars of applause and shouts of "Good old Stubby!"*)

LADY JEAN: Ah, yes, my love—we will fly together!

But as Sally ran forward to join Stubby on the old mare's back, disaster occurred.

In the dim depths of the audience a police-whistle shrilled. Bess pricked up her ears, gave one wild, startled look across the footlights, then reared backwards like a liberty horse. She whirled her forelegs. She brought them down with a resounding thump on the hollow boards of the platform. She danced and plunged. The audience roared excited advice. The players scattered, Sally screaming like a banshee.

For a moment there was chaos. Forgetting her age, Bess leaped about like a filly. Her haunches struck the piano, which clanged in agony. Her flying hooves made matchwood of a chair. The platform shuddered. A little girl in the audience began to howl. Her mother shrieked: "Fire!" Luckily no one paid attention. The noise was deafening.

Through it all, Stubby hung on grimly, retaining a certain amount of control.

"Whoa, Bess!" he shouted. "Whoa—whoa!"

Sandy was hustling Sally, Henry and Frogs to safety. In the front row Mr. Hector Todd rose terribly to his feet.

"Get that horse off the stage, Mr. Beach!" he bellowed, purple with anger.

Then someone had the presence of mind to close the curtains; and gradually, soothed by both Sandy and Stubby, Bess quietened. Sandy looked up at her white-faced rider.

"Well, Scott—I suppose you realise you've ruined the whole show?"

"Yes, sir," replied a supremely miserable Jock o' Hazeldean.

"By disobeying orders."

"Yes, sir. But—"

"Then take this beast to the stables." He held back the double doors. As Stubby dismounted and led a sobered Bess out into the darkness, Sandy made a grim prophecy: "You and your friends will hear more about this tomorrow!" he said.

CHAPTER TEN

CODE OF HONOUR

ON the day after the School Concert 'The Dark Avengers' were hailed as heroes. Even Cranwell remarked that in his six years' experience *Jock o' Hazeldean*—thanks largely to its climax—was the finest piece of entertainment ever witnessed at Strathmungo. Because of his part in the sensational production, Midge became a figure of importance in the First and began to assume haughty airs with small boys who had previously snubbed him.

But Stubby, Henry and Frogs were aware that their popularity had been dearly bought, that the honour accorded them by their fellow-pupils was, in effect, the same as that given by the cowed citizens of France to a Resistance group cornered by the Gestapo. It was a brief glory, soon to be extinguished; and the voices that sang their praises were tempered by compassion.

Nothing happened, however, until the last period, when the Third was taken for English by Mr. Beach. Sandy appeared to be in a reflective mood as he discussed Browning's lines: 'Grow

old along with me; the best is yet to be—the last of life for which the first was planned.’ But as the bell went and the class rose to dismiss, he became coolly business-like again.

“By the way,” he said, “I’d like Scott, Lucas and de la Tour to remain behind.”

They stood before his desk, waiting, the cold breath of tyranny already fanning their cheeks.

“Mr. Todd wishes to see you in his room,” Sandy went on. “I warned you last night, Scott, that you would be hearing more about that horse. Incidentally, whose idea was it?”

“Mine, sir,” said Stubby, quickly.

“Ah, *non!*” objected Frogs. “It came from all of us.”

In the face of disaster, Henry retained his attitude of precision.

“We discussed the matter, sir,” he pointed out, “and came to a unanimous decision.”

“Please don’t listen to them, sir,” said Stubby, earnestly. “It *was* my fault—”

“Wait a minute!” The suggestion of a smile hovered at one corner of Sandy’s mouth. “Let’s skip the question of blame. . . . *Why* did you do it, when you knew Sir Philip and I were against it?”

“Well—er—we wanted to give you a surprise, sir.” Stubby swallowed. “We thought you’d be pleased—you and Sir Philip.”

“As a matter of fact,” explained Henry, “we were keen to make the Concert an outstanding

success. You were the organiser, sir, and we thought that if it was a success Sir Philip might decide to make you Headmaster."

Sandy was taken by surprise. At first he suspected that Lucas was spinning a fancy tale, with a view to avoiding punishment; but a second's thought showed him that his suspicion was unjustified. Lucas would never tell a deliberate lie; besides, it was entirely unlike him to be guilty of 'toadying.' He realised that Henry had made a simple statement of fact. It was the first evidence he had ever received that his work and character were appreciated by the three boys, and it made him feel oddly humble. He wanted to unburden his heart, to explain that he understood them and was sincerely grateful for their efforts on his behalf. But he knew that the maintenance of law and order came first and acted accordingly.

"I see," he said, quietly "But the Concert was *not* a success—at any rate as far as Mr. Todd is concerned. And Sir Philip now thinks I'm a person completely lacking in discipline."

Stubby's face crinkled in dismay.

"Oh, gosh! I mean— I'm sorry, sir."

"Everything would have been *magnifique*," cried Frogs, "if it had not been for the whistle of the *gendarme*!" Passionately he clenched his fists. "Ah—that *cochon*—" He broke off, biting his lip.

"Yes, it was the whistle that did the damage, wasn't it?" Sandy glanced at them shrewdly.

"Someone knew the effect it would have on old Bess. Someone in the audience. Do you know who it was?"

There was a silence.

"No ideas at all?" he encouraged them.

The silence continued. Stubby coughed nervously. Frogs shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. Henry took off his glasses and gravely began to polish them.

"I see," said Sandy. "Anyone got a grudge against you, Scott?"

"I—er—couldn't say, sir."

Sandy picked up a piece of chalk and rubbed it on the desk.

"I was talking to Scilify Mac at his shop this morning," he remarked. "He said something about Deane being half-drowned with fizzy lemonade—just a couple of nights ago. Has that got anything to do with the police whistle?"

Stubby's cough became worse. Frog's round face oozed embarrassment. Henry's glasses absorbed his attention.

After a moment Sandy put down the chalk. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well—I don't suppose I should be asking questions," he said. "Code of honour—eh, Scott?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. But we masters have our code of honour, too. Whatever punishment Mr. Todd decides to give you, I will uphold it."

"Yes, sir," replied Stubby, in a low voice.

"But remember what I was saying in class." Sandy hesitated. He found his task difficult. Very quietly he went on: "When you are unhappy, you are generally far more unhappy than the occasion warrants. Grown-ups don't worry a tremendous lot about—well, about a nervous horse on the stage. What they *are* keen about is that chaps should be loyal, upright and honest. . . . Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

He smiled at 'The Dark Avengers,' and for some reason they felt that the world wasn't such a foul place after all.

"Now, then," he said, more crisply, "off you go and see Mr. Todd. He'll be waiting for you."

The boys left the room. The hall outside, scene of the Concert on the previous evening, was now quiet and deserted; and as they crossed the stone floor their footsteps echoed high in the roof. It was like a sequence in a film—a sequence in which the wrongfully accused heroes trudge across the prison-square to meet their doom.

It was Stubby who knocked at Mr. Todd's door, with—for him—unusual quietness and restraint. There was no answer.

They looked at each other.

"Perhaps he's not in," whispered Henry.

"Or has forgotten about us," said Frogs, clutching at a straw.

"Don't be wet!" Stubby was more of a realist. "He's in all right. Like a cat waiting for mice!"

He knocked again, rather more loudly. Still no answer.

"Perhaps he's dead," breathed Henry. . . .

"Who's there?" came a savage voice from within the room.

"He's *not* dead," said Stubby. "Pity!"

They braced themselves and opened the door. The dusty pile of algebra books was still on the desk. The bookcases and cupboards looked as bleak and unromantic as ever. Outside the window a blackbird was singing in the garden—a free spirit without a care in the world.

Mr. Todd sat behind the desk. He looked up, adjusted his pincenez and smiled; and when he smiled he resembled a tiger at feeding-time.

"Ah—Scott and Co! Come in!"

He leaned back in his chair. One hand strayed to his watch-chain; the other drummed on an open exercise-book. Wind whined in the empty hall behind the closed door.

"Mr. Beach said you wanted to see us, sir," said Stubby.

"I certainly do!" The smile was fading. "In point of fact, where you three boys are concerned my patience is exhausted. I suppose you realise that by bringing a horse on to the stage you might have killed someone?. . . Answer my question, Scott!"

"Yes, sir."

"The piano has also been damaged, and several chairs broken." The Toad's voice sank to a threatening monotone. "If I were actually Headmaster—as I hope soon to be—I might feel obliged to expel you. At the same time—"

Stubby took a deep breath.

"Excuse me, sir," he interrupted, gallantly. "It was all my fault. Lucas and de la Tour had nothing to do with—"

"Silence!" rasped Mr Todd. "As I say, in certain circumstances I might feel obliged to expel all three of you. But I realise that Mr. Beach—by neglecting to maintain proper discipline—was also to blame. Your punishment, therefore, will be more lenient than perhaps the occasion warrants." The smile returned. "You do agree that you deserve some kind of punishment? . . . Speak up, 'cott!"

"Er—yes, sir."

"And Lucas—you also admit your culpability?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you, de la Tour?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

Mr. Todd scowled.

"For Heaven's sake," he snapped at Frogs, "how many times must I tell you not to address me as 'moosoor'!"

"Ah, *pardon, monsieur*—I—I mean, sorry, sir!"

"Very well." The Toad cleared his throat. "Today is Friday." he continued, winding his watch-chain round a finger. "At the week-end and during all next week you will be confined to the School grounds. The village, the beach—in fact the whole of Strathmungo—will be out of bounds. You understand?"

Bowing to their fate, the boys chorused a bleak affirmative.

"And should any of you disobey this order in the slightest degree, I may say that the result will be most unfortunate for the culprit. . . . You may go now."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE POOR AND OPPRESSED

THE long days passed.

To make matters worse for 'The Dark Avengers,' the October weather had set in gloriously fine. It was an Indian summer. The sea lazed on the beaches, sighing and sparkling in the sun. In the green pine-woods, among the bramble-canef, thrushes and blackbirds sang a gay chorus in defiance of coming winter. A consciousness of freedom—of joyous abandon—lay upon the land; but Stubby, Henry and Frogs, confined within the grounds of the School, had no share in it.

During the week-end they had experienced the pity of their friends. Forbidden to go riding or sailing, they had been compelled by the Toad to take exercise by digging in the garden. At first they had rather enjoyed the sensation of martyrdom, but as time dragged on, and the rest of the School began to take their sufferings for granted, they became sad and even a trifle bitter. It was galling to see the other chaps going off in the evening for a sail in the Bay or a gallop

along the shore, while they themselves wandered about the senior quad or sighed at the shining sea from their dormitory window.

And at the back of their minds was the knowledge that within the next few days a new Headmaster would be appointed at a meeting of the Board of Governors. Unless a miracle happened, it seemed certain that the Toad would get the job. The prospect was grim.

On the following Wednesday most of the boys went down to the village to watch the local Highland Games, which always took place after the harvest. But 'The Dark Avengers,' still under the ban of authority, had to remain behind. They found a quiet corner of the garden, underneath a big currant bush, and sprawled there unhappily.

"Talk about being poor and oppressed!" growled Stubby. "Stuck here like prisoners--and most of the others enjoying themselves."

Henry sighed.

"*Dies in/austus*. Unlucky day!"

"That—that 'Toad!' spluttered Frogs, viciously.

"I wish I was Stalin!" said Stubby. "I'd summon him to the Kremlin and have him brought before me in chains—crawling on his knees. Then I'd send him to the salt-mines in Siberia!"

Frogs demurred.

"That would be too—what is the word?—too

humane. I would put him on the rack till his bones were broken, then dip him in boiling oil."

"And when he screamed for mercy," said Henry, "I should remind him what he did to *us*."

There was a dark, imaginative silence. Then Stubby picked up a stone and flung it hard at nothing in particular.

"Gosh! Think of the life we'll have if they make him Head. Like slaves!"

"Did you hear how smarmy he was about Sandy?" returned Henry. "Sort of gloating, because he thinks Sandy is out of the running."

"I know," said Stubby.

Presently they saw a small figure coming down the path, peering into the currant bushes. He was whistling and his hands were buried deep in his trousers' pockets.

"Hullo, Midge!" shouted Henry.

He grinned, thrust his way through the foliage and sat down. A trifle shyly he looked at the bigger boys, then gave the password, *Facta non verba*.

"I was searching for you," he explained. "To — to tell you a secret."

"You look jolly pleased about it," replied Stubby. "Spill the beans!"

Midge hesitated, and Frogs suggested hopefully that the great news might refer to Mr. Todd's assassination. But the small boy shook his head.

"It's got nothing to do with the School—or, well, yes it *has*—in a way."

"Don't dither!" snapped Stubby. "Tell us!"

Midge looked about him then lowered his voice.

"I—I've got a monkey!" he said.

"A *what*?"

"A monkey."

"How bizarre!" observed Henry. "Have you got it here—in the School?"

"No. That's the trouble. My people sent him from the Gold Coast. He had to go through quarantine and everything. But Mr. Todd won't let me have him in the School. So he's being kept by the gamekeeper at his house in the village."

"Old MacNiven?" inquired Stubby.

"Yes."

"I don't like *him* very much. All the same you're jolly lucky, Midge!"

Frogs nodded vigorously.

"I have always wished for a monkey. I have a great love of the animals."

"What is the species?" asked Henry, in his precise way. "What *kind*, I mean? Chimpanzee, rhesus, long-tailed—"

"I don't know. Just an ordinary monkey. Quite small, with the funniest bare patch behind!"

"Ah—rhesus!" smiled the enlightened zoologist.

"But he's as tame as anything—and terribly clever," Midge went on. "He can eat out of a plate with a spoon. I'm just on my way to see him now."

"Has he got a name?" asked Stubby.

"Yes. MacSporran."

"Jolly good. Gosh—I wish we could go with you!"

In the midst of his own happiness, Midge experienced a pang of sympathy for his friends.

"I'm sorry you're being kept in," he said. "It's horrid hard lines."

Stubby shrugged.

"Oh, don't upset yourself. Once you're our age you'll have learned how to bear suffering. Give our love to MacSporran," he continued, as the small boy got up. "Tell him we'll come and see him in—in four days from now."

"All right. I'll let you know more about him when I come back."

"That's an idea. Come to our dorm."

But when Midge, true to his promise, appeared in their room after supper they saw at once that something serious had happened. His face was grimy with dried up tears, and he maintained his composure only with an effort.

"What's wrong?" demanded Stubby.

"I - I've something *beastly* to tell you."

"About your monkey?"

"Yes. MacNiven has been—ill-treating him."

Henry looked concerned.

"I'm not surprised. That thin mouth of his. You can see he's cruel."

"Bulldog! *Cochon!*" exclaimed Frogs, roused at once. "What has he done?"

"MacSporran got loose in the kitchen and—and broke some cups and saucers. So MacNiven whipped him. He—he was all bleeding when I saw him and kind of whimpering."

"MacNiven and the Toad!" muttered Frogs, fiercely. "Birds of the same feather!"

"I said I'd take him away," continued Midge, blowing his nose. "But MacNiven just laughed and said he'd like to see me try."

"I expect he's being well paid," remarked Henry.

Stubby's thin, speckled face was tense with thought.

"Look here, Midge," he said, at last. "Why not tell the Toad? He might arrange for someone else to look after MacSporran."

"I—I'd be scared to ask."

"Don't be wet! You must learn to shoulder your responsibilities."

"Yes, but—"

"It's for MacSporran's sake. You must try. . . . I'd ask the Toad myself, only Henry and Frogs and I aren't any too popular at the moment."

For a time Midge was silent. His small, rather pale face grew paler still under the stress of his emotion. Then, quite suddenly, he made up his mind.

"All right," he said, manfully squaring his shoulders. "I'll ask him tomorrow."

"Good show!" approved Stubby. "And remember—be quite firm about it."

But when Midge, screwing up his courage almost to breaking point, ultimately found his way into Mr. Todd's office the following morning, he could only stammer out a disjointed, incoherent story. Standing with his back to the fire, his hands spread out behind him to the meagre blaze, the Toad allowed his youthful visitor to ramble on; and when the tale had petered out in a gasping plea for MacSportan, he smiled. For a moment, misunderstanding that smile, Midge felt a surge of hope. Perhaps the Maths master wasn't so bad after all. Though unsympathetic with boys, perhaps he had a soft spot for animals—especially small and frightened monkeys . . . Then Mr. Todd began to ask a series of soft-voiced questions. The smile faded and with it Midge's optimism.

Finally the temporary Head returned to his desk. Lifting a heavy ruler, he brought it down with a crack.

"The whole idea is preposterous!" His eyes and voice were as cold as Arctic night. "Boys of your age are always inclined to exaggerate. Your monkey is in good hands. If Mr. MacNiven found him misbehaving he was perfectly entitled to punish him."

"Yes, sir." Midge looked desperate. "But—but he shouldn't have punished him so hard."

The Toad leaned back. His smile reasserted itself.

"Ah—Ferguson the humanitarian! Let me tell you, my boy, I am a great believer in the old adage, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.' In my humble opinion, it applies equally well to monkeys."

"But, sir—"

"That will do. Your monkey remains with Mr. MacNiven. You may go."

During the lunch hour an extraordinary general meeting of 'The Dark Avengers' was convened in the cellars below the School. The dusty, cobwebby shadows were a fitting background for their gloomy deliberations.

"There's only one thing for it now," said Stubby, finally. "Deeds not words." He beat his point home on the worn surface of the steps. "We must kidnap him."

"Who?" said Midge. "Mr. Todd?"

"No, you idiot—MacSporran."

There was a moment of silence.

"I don't quite see the point," admitted Henry, at last.

"Nor do I." Frogs waved his hands. "You are hiding your light under a grain-measure, Stubby."

"Under a *bushel*."

"Ah, *oui*. Pardon."

But Midge, desperately concerned about his monkey, had for once the keenest perception.

"Do you mean we should try and bring MacSporran here to the School?"

"Well, perhaps." Stubby was staring into the dark, chin cupped in hand—a living replica of the famous statue, *Le Penseur*. "But only for a short time," he went on. "Till we get someone to look after him properly."

"If the Toad found him in our dorm," said Henry, "he'd have us shot at dawn or something!"

"Listen," returned Stubby. "I've been thinking this out. MacSporran must be rescued. That's agreed, isn't it?"

"*Certainement!*" exclaimed Frogs.

Henry nodded, gravely.

"He and Midge are poor and oppressed. Besides, the dictates of common humanity make such a course imperative."

Stubby blinked.

"By Jove," he said, admiringly, "that's a jolly good way of putting it! But the point is, who's going to look after him when we *do* kidnap him?"

"Sliffy Mac," suggested Frogs.

"No." Stubby shook his head. "It would put him in an awkward position if the Toad made a fuss. After all, he gets his living off the School. . . . What about Sally Andrews? It would make her feel important. We could pretend MacSporran had escaped from the gamekeeper; and if Sir Philip Andrews' daughter said she wanted to keep him—well, the Toad wouldn't dare say no."

The others chewed over this Machiavellian scheme. Frogs was the first to make a comment.

"That is a plan!" he said with sudden enthusiasm. "That is what you call a — a pippin!"

But as usual Henry was concerned with possible flaws.

"Sir Philip might object to a monkey. Remember what happened when Frogs brought his mice!"

"If we get Sally on our side," returned Stubby, "it doesn't matter about Sir Philip. What Sally says *goes!*"

"I suppose you're right."

"Would—would she be kind to MacSporran?" inquired Midge.

"Of course!" Stubby was reassuring. "She may be a bit spoilt, but she's not cruel."

"In many ways she is charming," supplemented Frogs.

"But how are we going to *do* the kidnapping?" asked Henry. "Remember we're still confined to the School."

"We'll just have to break bounds — for an hour or so. The Toad never asked us to give our parole. Besides, it's a work of necessity and mercy."

Midge caught his arm.

"Oh, Stubby—what if you're caught?"

"Don't talk wet! Listen, Midge. This afternoon—after Prayers—nip over to Sir Philip's house and ask Sally to come and speak to us at

the garden wall. Near the wicket-gate. Six o' clock sharp."

"All right, but—"

He broke off as the sound of the School bell penetrated into the 'dungeons.' For the Third Formers its brassy tongue promised a bleak afternoon of Roman History, Greek verbs and—as a climax—algebra with the Toad.

"We'll have to go," said Stubby, scrambling unwillingly to his feet. "Don't forget, Midge. Come to the wall with Sally at six o' clock."

Somehow the afternoon went by. Towards the end of the algebra period Mr. Todd gave Stubby a problem to solve. If a equals b and x equals y , what is the value of a plus b plus x plus y ? As he stood there, tongue-tied, bearing the brunt of the Toad's ironic encouragement, he was seeing the problem in a different way. If a equals Mac-Sporran and x equals 'The Dark Avengers' calculate the result of bringing the two together. Algebraically and otherwise, the answer eluded him.

But at six o' clock, when he found Sally and Midge awaiting him at the garden wall, his courage and optimism were beginning to return. Sally was intrigued by Midge's appeal for co-operation. Her hair had been whipped into confusion by the wind, and her rosy cheeks gave no hint of her recent influenza. Her bare legs were smudged with lichen picked up on the

woodland path. Midge was dishevelled; but his eyes glowed with the intensity of his desire to help MacSporran. Only Stubby remained stolidly calm.

"Hullo, Sally." As a rule he didn't approve of talking to girls; but this was an exceptional case. "Jolly glad you could come."

"I want to help," she whispered, eagerly. "Where are Henry and Frogs?"

"Keeping watch behind the currant bushes—to warn us if anyone comes."

"I told her about the monkey," said Midge.

Sally nodded.

"It's a shame - poor MacSporran! I'll be only too pleased to look after him, if you get him away from the gamekeeper. And Midge can see him as often as he likes."

"Good show!" said Stubby. "This is our plan," he went on, his voice sinking to a confidential monotone. "Tonight - about two o' clock in the morning—Frogs and I will go down to the gamekeeper's cottage in the village and kidnap MacSporran. He's kept in an outhouse with an ordinary window, so it ought to be easy. Then we'll take him back and keep him in our dorm till tomorrow at lunch-time. Can you be here—at this same spot - about one?"

"Yes, easily."

"We'll give you MacSporran then. The gamekeeper won't dare to ask for him back if you say you're keeping him for Midge."

"All right."

Stubby glanced behind him into the tangle of currant bushes.

"We'd better go," he said.

Sally smiled.

"Goodbye, then." She was so excited that she could scarcely keep still. "Take care of yourselves tonight."

His masculine coolness was superb.

"We'll be okay. The whole thing won't take an hour. And everyone ought to be asleep."

CHAPTER TWELVE

OUT OF BOUNDS

"ARE you awake, Henry?"

"Yes."

"And I also," whispered Frogs. "Is it time?"

"It's nearly two." Stubby rose and crossed to the open window. "The moon's gone under. Couldn't be better."

Ever since lights-out 'The Dark Avengers' had been lying in bed, fully dressed, dozing and keeping their ears open for the chimes of the School clock. Now they were ready for the attempt to rescue MacSporran.

Making as little noise as possible, Henry and Frogs got up and joined Stubby at the window. A bank of cloud rearing up from the sou'east had dimmed the light of the moon, and the garden, thirty feet below, was only dimly visible. The route to MacNiven's cottage in the village—through the woods and down the lower slopes of Ben Caladh—was concealed in darkness. It was a splendid night for their purpose.

Abruptly, Stubby turned away.

"Mustn't waste time," he jerked out.

They pulled the sheets from their beds and began to tie them together.

"Look here, Stubby," said Henry, as he secured one end of the home-made 'rope' to the leg of his bed, "why won't you let me come with you?"

"I've told you. When Frogs and I climb down from the window you'll have to be here to pull the sheets up, in case anyone sees them hanging. And when we come back you'll have to lower them again."

Henry sighed.

"I'm only a stooge in this job!" he complained.

"Do not be sad," whispered Frogs. "You are the home defence just as important as the expeditionary force."

"Anyway," growled Stubby, closing the argument, "orders is orders" He tested the sheets, found the anchoring knot firm and lowered them from the window. Looking over the sill, he saw the free end of the 'rope' dangling only a few feet above the ground. "Right, Frogs," he said. "I'll go first." He climbed out and paused with one foot hovering in space. "We should be back about three, Henry. I'll throw up some gravel."

"All right."

The clock struck the four quarters, then two sonorous chimes; and the sound helped to obliterate any small noises made by Stubby and Frogs as they went down the face of the building,

hand under hand. Finally they stood together in a chrysanthemum border and collected their wits. Above their heads the white sheets were already whisking up the wall, as Henry pulled them back into the dormitory. They glanced at the sleeping School, its windows bleak and silent, then turned away and drifted like cloud-shadows towards the gate in the high wall.

In the pine-wood, they followed the usual short-cut to the village. They had used it so often that even in the dark they were in no danger of losing their way. Nevertheless, they were uneasy, for the sounds of night are vastly different from those of the daytime. As they hurried along in single file, Stubby leading, voices seemed to whisper in the wind in the tree-tops. Branches creaked like men in pain; undergrowth moved and rustled as if a bloated monster were stirring in its depths. An owl hooted, and the boys' hearts came up into their throats.

It was better when they got out of the wood and began to descend the steep, grassy slope above the village, though when they stumbled on a flock of sleeping sheep and the dim, grey forms pattered away in all directions, it was as much as Frogs could do to keep silent.

The gamekeeper's cottage stood by itself at one end of the main street. It was an unmistakable landmark, the white painted bars of its kennels in sharp contrast with the remainder of the dull grey

building. The outhouse in which MacSporran was kept lay just beyond the glimmer of white.

"We must not let the dogs hear us," murmured Frogs.

"We'll have to risk it." Stubby paused at the fence which enclosed the cottage grounds. "Come on."

They climbed the fence and slowly worked their way past the kennels. The cottage was as quiet as a mau oleum. On the street, a hundred yards away, a hunting cat snarled and scampered. The sound was disturbingly loud in the still night, and they stopped, suddenly motionless and tense. But nothing happened. The dogs appeared to be sleeping the sleep of the just. . . .

They reached the outhouse. It had one window. Stubby tested the lower sash, then pushed it up with scarcely a sound. As he did so, a low, apprehensive chattering came from inside.

"Listen!" breathed Frogs. "*Le pauvre Mac-Sporran!*"

"Thank goodness we've found him!" replied Stubby. "You wait here and keep a look-out. I'll go in and get him."

He wriggled over the window-sill and disappeared. Frogs heard him moving about, knocking against unseen obstacles in the dark. Suddenly there came a stifled exclamation and more excited monkey-chatter.

Then Stubby was back at the window and

climbing out, with a clawing, scratching fury under one arm.

"Gosh! He bit my thumb, Frogs."

They stood on the asphalt path, doing their best to soothe the overwrought monkey: and after a while MacSporran seemed to understand that they were friendly and quietened down. Stubby tucked him below his blazer.

"Better keep him warm," he said. "Now, let's beat it."

They tip-toed past the dim kennels. It was still so quiet that the sough of the sea could be heard in the distance. Then Frogs trod on a twig with a sound like the report of an air-gun. A dog growled. Below Stubby's blazer the monkey wriggled and chattered.

"Oh, shut up, MacSporran! Run for it, Frogs!"

They made a beeline for the fence. They heard another growl and a quick, short bark. Though the dogs were behind bars, MacNiven might be roused and come after them.

Once over the fence they raced for the School path, stumbling over invisible tussocks of grass. They encountered the sheep again but this time did not hesitate and scrambled like escaping prisoners up the slope. Gradually the sound of barking died away. . . .

When they reached the wood they paused to cover breath.

"That was a near thing!" panted Stubby, squatting down beside a clump of hazel and comforting MacSporran, who was still whimpering.

"Those dogs!" exclaimed the French boy. "It was terrible. My hair was standing on the end!"

"If MacNiven had come out he might have shot us."

Suddenly they heard a sound of movement in the wood: a hesitant, intermittent movement, as if someone --or something --were gradually approaching. The moon had now appeared from behind the bank of cloud, and Stubby and Frogs glanced at each other in consternation. They crouched down behind the hazel trees, merging with the trellised shadows cast by the branches.

The sound came closer. A stick snapped, and the movement stopped. Mercifully MacSporran remained quiet. Then, only a few yards away, there was a quick intake of breath and a stifled cough. Stubby and Frogs were relieved: the cause of the movement was at least human. . . .

But who could be prowling in the woods at this time of morning? The boys prayed that whoever it was might soon go away, for if they were discovered in their present position, and the fact communicated to the Tower, the result would be disastrous. High above their heads the moon swam across the sky, ducking in and out among

the flying remnants of clouds. They held their breath and waited.

Then the stranger moved again, coming still closer to the hazel trees. The sound of his irregular footsteps was oddly familiar; but for a moment



"Gosh—it's you, Sciffy!"

neither of the boys recognised it. Stubby's whole attention was concentrated on keeping perfectly motionless, so that MacSporran might not be disturbed and start chattering. But the very rigidity of his body defeated its purpose. He felt the monkey squirm below his blazer. Tense muscles caused his protecting arm to jerk tight, and the monkey squawked with surprise and indignation.

Frogs uttered a small hiss of dismay. Then, before they could move, the stranger plunged into the tangle of hazel boughs and stood above them.

"For goodness' sake—who is this?"

The boys scrambled to their feet and Stubby uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Gosh—it's you, Sciffy!"

He peered at them, his drooping moustaches prominent against his long, lean face.

"It's Mr. Stubby and Mr. Frogs! What in the world are you doing?"

They stood together among the supple, slippery hazels, each busy with his own particular problem. Stubby swallowed. The bulge in his blazer moved and altered shape.

"Look here, Sciffy," he blurted out, "you won't give us away, will you?"

The man's bushy eyebrows rose, making him look more than ever like a thin walrus.

"Of course not! Why should I be giving you away?" He lowered his voice. "In any case," he added, "I hope you'll not be giving *me* away!"

"Why? What are you doing?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm after having a look at my snares. Sir Philip is not too keen on ordinary folk catching his rabbits, so I have to do it on the quiet."

Frogs' round face shone in the moonlight.

"The poacher, eh?"

"Och, you could hardly be calling it poaching."

Sclicffy Mac smiled gently and shook his head. "For all the rabbits I am getting! It's keeping down the vermin I am! . . . But what are you doing here yourselves?"

Stubby shifted his feet, considerably embarrassed.

"It's a long story," he began, then broke off as MacSporran scratched and squirmed. He saw Sclicffy Mac's attention suddenly attracted to his blazer. He saw his mouth slowly begin to sag.

"Gosh be aboot us!" breathed the shopkeeper, staring at a small wizened head which had suddenly appeared under Stubby's chin. "What on earth is that thing in your jacket?"

The monkey chattered and squealed.

"MacSporran!" implored Frogs. "Please shut down!"

"MacSporran!" Sclicffy Mac was shaken. "And which of the MacSporrans is this? Mercy on us—what a terrible-looking baby!"

Stubby perceived that their friend had made a slight mistake.

"It's not a baby! Only a monkey. He belongs to Midge Ferguson—you know, young Ferguson of the First. His parents sent him from Africa."

"So it is!" Chuckling, Sclicffy Mac regained his normal poise. "*Chiall*—this moonlight! For a while I was thinking it was one of the MacSporrans, the tinkers!"

"Mr. Todd wouldn't allow him in the School,"

Stubby explained, "and MacNiven the game-keeper was ill-treating him, so we decided to kidnap him and hand him over to Sally Andrews."

"Och, I see. You did quite right. MacNiven is an old rascal. . . . But you'd better be hurrying back now—as quick as you can," he advised them.

"Thanks for being such a good sport," said Stubby.

"Och, don't worry. This will be a secret between ourselves."

"I hope you get plenty of rabbits."

Scilly Mac smiled and waved as they moved off into the wood.

"I'll be telling you about it, the next time you're in the shop . . . So long."

Ten minutes later, the boys were back in their dormitory.

"*Deo gratias!*" exclaimed Henry, as Frogs, last to essay the difficult climb, heaved and panted in across the sill. "I thought you'd been caught. What about MacSportan."

"Stubby has got him under his blazer," replied the French boy, hurriedly pulling up the knotted sheets.

Standing near the window, Stubby was thoughtful.

"There was a flicker of light in Dirty Dick's dorm just now," he said. "Hope no one spotted us. . . . Anyway, close the window and pull down

the blind, Frogs. Then Henry can use his torch and have a look at MacSporran."

The monkey had been enjoying a well earned slumber, which even Stubby's strenuous climb had failed to disturb. When preparations for viewing him were complete, Stubby had to prod him into consciousness.

"Hey—wake up and be introduced to your Uncle Henry!"

He sat on the back of a chair, blinking.

"Gosh—what bright eyes he's got!" grinned Henry. "Hullo boy!"

MacSporran chattered amiably.

"He likes you," said Frogs.

"You're quite safe now," Henry shook a miniature paw. "No more cruel gamekeepers."

The monkey nodded and bared his teeth. Stubby grinned.

"Bet you he understands every word you're saying!"

"Do you, MacSporran?" asked Henry, tickling the small, hairy chin, and their new friend hopped up and down, gleefully.

"Ah, *c'est drôle!*" chuckled Frogs. "He is nearly speaking."

"Look, here," said Stubby, coming back to realities, "we'll have to get him to bed. Someone might hear us. Where can he sleep?"

"With my mice," suggested Frogs. "In my pyjama-case in the wardrobe."

"Good idea! Here you are, MacSporran. A nice, comfortable bed. Don't worry about the mice. They're harmless."

The monkey accepted the situation with admirable philosophy. He seemed to smile to the boys as they bade him goodnight and closed the wardrobe door.

"Well, that's that," said Stubby, beginning to undress. "But our troubles will start again in the morning. We'll have to give him some kind of breakfast. And at lunch-time we've got to smuggle him out to Sally Andrews."

Frogs bent down to unlace his shoes. The School was quiet, except for a faint wind whining in the corridor outside.

"*Mon vieux*," he answered. "do not cross the bridges until they arrive."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INFORMERS

NEXT day, having finished their lunch, Mr. Alexander Beach and Mr. Simon Pomphrey went out into the garden for a smoke. The boys were still noisily engaged in the dining-room, and as they did not happen to be on meals duty that week, Sandy and Simple Simon were glad of the opportunity to digest their food in peace.

They strolled down the 'hothouse path and stopped near the currant bushes. Mr. Pomphrey lit a cigarette, while Sandy filled his pipe. In the wood outside birds were carolling. The School towers rose in silhouette against a clear blue sky.

Sandy lit his pipe and threw away the match.

"I say, Simon—did you notice anything odd during breakfast today?"

"Odd?"

"Yes. Those three inseparables—Scott, Lucas and de la Tour—they seemed to be rather restless and excited."

"Now that you mention it, they were more than usually inattentive in class, later in the morning."

"If my eyes didn't deceive me, Lucas took most of his porridge away in a paper bag."

Mr. Pomphrey scratched his fluffy head.

"Good gracious! But why?"

"That's the point. I don't know. . . . And I'm pretty certain Scott and de la Four pocketed most of their bacon, too."

"Did you question them?"

"No." Sandy smiled. He put his foot on an upturned barrow, leaned forward, and rested an elbow on his knee. The smoke from his pipe drifted across the path into the curtain bushes. "They're confined to School at the moment for bringing that horse on to the stage—and I hadn't the heart to add to their troubles."

Mr. Pomphrey frowned.

"In my opinion confining them to School was most unfair of Mr. Todd. . . . By the way, any news of the Headmastership?"

"I believe Sir Philip has called a meeting of the Board of Governors for next week. It'll be decided then." Sandy looked thoughtful. "I'm afraid I haven't a chance," he said. "Not now, at any rate. Sir Philip took a poor view of the Concert."

Simple Simon watched a snail crawling among the stems of the late cabbages.

"If Mr. Todd becomes Head," he murmured, "I think I shall retire and rear chickens."

Sandy smiled.

"The boys wouldn't stand for that!"

But for once Mr. Pomphrey was emphatic.

"I tell you—if Todd is appointed he'll make Strathmungo into a kind of penitentiary. He'll break the fine independent spirit of the boys in six months."

"Something in that. But it might be a more efficient school."

"Efficiency! Bah! Efficiency kills the joy of life. You know the traditions of Strathmungo, Sandy—courage and initiative. Where would the Empire be if Drake and Sidney and David Livingstone had been merely efficient? There must always be room for individuality."

"For people like Scott; eh?"

"Exactly!" Suddenly Mr. Pomphrey broke off. "Talking of angels!" he said, and pointed.

Coming towards them along the path, about twenty yards away, Sandy saw a strange procession consisting of Stubby, Henry, Frogs and Midge, in that order. Stubby's blazer was bulging in a peculiar fashion, and when he caught sight of the two masters his freckles disappeared in a flood of crimson. Frogs, too, blushed furiously; Henry's Roman nose became sharper than ever, while Midge's sensitive mouth quivered in dismay. For a moment it seemed as if they meant to turn and take to their heels; then Stubby said something under his breath and they came on, obviously determined to proceed with

whatever purpose they had in mind. Frogs began to whistle.

"They must have got through lunch pretty quickly," said Mr. Pomphrey. "Where can they be going?"

"To the gate in the wall, apparently. Otherwise they wouldn't be so keen to pass us." Sandy chuckled. "Did you ever see four chaps looking quite so guilty!"

The History master camouflaged a smile.

"They're up to something," he agreed. "What on earth is Scott carrying under his blazer?"

By the time 'The Dark Avengers' were within a few yards of the two men. Frogs was looking about him—at the School buildings, at the pine-wood, anywhere but straight ahead. His whistle had assumed a piercing, tuneless quality. Henry had taken off his glasses and was engaged in a bout of polishing. Midge, stumbling blindly in the rear, was obviously a victim of desperate anxiety. Stubby, however, though still flushed, had his emotions well under control. As he came abreast of the masters he touched his forehead and paused politely to say good afternoon.

At his back, bumping into one another like carriages coming to a halt behind a railway engine, Henry, Frogs and Midge repeated the performance. They stood in a voiceless row, the picture of embarrassment and suppressed excitement.

Mr. Pomphrey was curious.

"You didn't eat much lunch, surely?" he remarked to Stubby.

"We—er—we like to get out in the fresh air, sir."

"That's quite obvious from your freckles, Scott," grinned Sandy. Then he started as a muffled squawk came from somewhere near at hand. "What was that?" he said.

MacSpotran was fighting for freedom under Stubby's blazer. For a moment a small brown head showed above the lapel, though neither of the masters seemed to notice it. Stubby was so appalled that he could not utter a word.

Henty, however, took a deep breath and came to his rescue.

"Perhaps it's a weasel, sir—among the currant bushes."

"Or a mice," Fogs blurted out. "A mouse, I mean."

Sandy had what Carlyle calls an 'instinct of understanding.'

"Perhaps you'd better investigate," he suggested.

The boys required no second bidding. Swiftly, simultaneously they touched their foreheads. Then, like rabbits, they shot off into the foliage and disappeared. The two men looked after them.

"Did you see what I did, Simon?" The corners of Sandy's mouth were twitching.

"Er--the little furry head that popped up out of Scott's blazer?"

"Yes. I'll swear it was a monkey."

Mr. Pomphrey nodded.

"It gave me quite a turn!"

"Officially you saw nothing, though?"

"Quite." The History master chuckled. "The blind eye to the telescope. I had a tame ferret at school myself. A jolly affectionate little animal, but good gracious, what a smell! One of the masters found it - a perfectly beastly chap he was. He took it away and killed it, and I don't think I was ever so unhappy before or since."

They began to walk back towards the School. . . .

Meanwhile, at the wicket-gate behind the currant bushes, the boys were interviewing Sally.

"Thank goodness you managed to come," whispered Stubby.

"I told Dad I was going for a walk in the woods. Quite true, really."

Stubby took MacSporran from under his blazer and handed him to her.

"That's your Aunt Sally, old chap. Go on--don't be frightened!"

The monkey jumped on to her shoulder and put his tiny arms round her neck.

"Oh--he's a darling!" she exclaimed flushing with pleasure.

"A rhesus, actually," grinned Henry.

Stubby frowned.

"This isn't a time for being smart!" he said, and his friend subsided, suitably crushed.

"You—you'll be kind to him, Sally?" queried Midge.

"Of course. I bought about a stone of hazelnuts from Scliffy Mac this morning."

Stubby expressed approval.

"You can feed him as soon as you get back home," he said. "He had some porridge and bacon for breakfast, but he hasn't had any lunch. . . . We'd better go now," he went on. "Sandy and Simple Simon are snooping around."

"All right." Sally got up from her knees, holding MacSporran. "I'll tell Dad I got him near the School—which is also true!"

"You won't forget he's really mine?" said Midge, anxiously. "I mean. . ."

"Don't talk wet!" put in Stubby, irritated by this show of sloppysentiment. "Come on, chaps. . . . Goodbye, Sally. You're a decent sort—for a girl."

The boys retraced their steps through the currant bushes and emerged on the path. They looked at one another and breathed a combined sigh of heartfelt relief. The ticklish, long drawn-out task had been accomplished, apparently without a hitch. The poor and oppressed had been well and truly succoured. It was the best thing they had ever done—a triumph for "The Dark Avengers."

"*Exitus acta probat*," murmured Henry. "The result proves the action."

Stubby grinned. Righteousness glowed within him, and he was inclined to be modest about their achievements.

"It proves we were lucky," he replied.

Midge looked up at the older boys. The strain and anxiety had gone from his face.

"Thank you very much for helping me," he said shyly.

With an avuncular gesture, Stubby pinched his ear.

"Forget it, child. We couldn't allow Mac-Sporran to be ill-treated."

Suddenly Henry grew tense.

"Look who's coming!" he whispered.

Some of the pleasure went out of their day. Dirty Dick and Paleface were coming towards them along the path, smiling in sinister fashion. It was obvious that they had already seen Stubby and his friends and meant to intercept them.

"Beat it, Midge!" ordered Stubby, quietly; and, nothing loath, the small boy vanished in the direction of the hothouse.

They stood shoulder to shoulder. An attack was imminent. They sensed it. But whether it would take a physical form was uncertain.

"What do you want?" demanded Stubby, as the senior boys approached.

"Just a little talk," smiled Dirty Dick. "I'm sure you'll be interested in what we have to say."

"Hurry up and say it, then!"

"All right, Scott. In one sentence. We saw you breaking bounds last night."

The world stood still. Chaotic visions of utter ruin surged in the minds of 'The Dark Avengers.' The scent of flowers and the gay bird-song in the trees became tinged with unreality. The dark bulk of the School seemed to sway in upon their thoughts. A moment ago they had been congratulating themselves on a piece of work well done. Now they knew that once again they had miserably failed.

It was Frogs who first recovered his voice.

"You are telling the lies!" he exclaimed, passionately. "You are the bulldogs! You are making falsehoods . . ."

"Dick and I were at our window," interrupted Paleface smoothly, and Stubby remembered the flickering glow that had worried him on the previous night. "We saw you and Scott coming back from the village."

"And just now," added Dirty Dick, "we followed you from the dining-room, hid in the rhododendrons and saw you handing a monkey to Sally Andrews."

Stubby looked him in the eye.

"Are you going to give us away?" he asked.

"You bet!" replied Dirty Dick with a snarl. "I haven't forgotten that lemonade you squirted in my face. Mr. Todd is going to hear how you disobeyed orders. *This very afternoon!*"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SENTENCE

THAT evening, in their room, 'The Dark Avengers' awaited a summons from Mr. Todd. Dirty Dick had carried out his threat immediately after Prayers and it seemed safe to assume that the temporary Head was now considering what action to take.

"We may be expelled," said Henry.

"Just Frogs and me," replied Stubby. "You didn't break bounds."

"It doesn't matter. If you and Frogs are expelled, I'll go, too!"

Frogs smiled.

"You are the good contrale," he said quietly.

"But why *should* the Toad exel us?" demanded Stubby. "We can explain that we did it for MacSporian's sake. Not for ourselves—but to prevent cruelty to a dumb animal."

"What does the Toad care?" Henry was unusually grim. "He's cruel himself."

"That's true. . . . Gosh, we're in a proper mess!"

Frogs shrugged.

"What is your Scotch song? 'There's nae luck about the dwelling-place.'"

"You've said it!" Stubby sighed. "Nothing comes off for us. Do you think we should disband 'The Dark Avengers?'"

"No. We are trying to do what's right," argued Henry. "And Simple Simon is always telling us about the greatest lesson of history: you know— 'Right always triumphs in the end.'"

"That's all very well," replied Stubby. "But sometimes the end is a long time coming."

There was a knock at the door. Cranwell put his head inside.

"Mr. Todd wants to see Scott and de la Tour. Pronto! Come on, get running!"

Half-an-hour later the news was out. It went like wildfire. Low voices discussed it in the garden, in the quads, in the draughty corridors. It floated in the air like an epidemic. A rain-cloud rose up behind Ben Caladh, chilling the air and bringing to an end the Indian summer. It was a symbol of the raw and startled mood that came upon the School.

Small boys with long faces confided in their friends.

"I say- have you heard?"

"I'll buy it, Stinks."

"Scott and de la Tour of the Third—they're to be expelled!"

"Gosh- what for?"

"Breaking bounds."

"Horrid shame! Scott's a decent chap."

"It was Dirty Dick and Paleface who gave them away. . . . Look out—here's a proc."

The procs themselves were upset.

"I've a good mind to see Sandy about it," said Cranwell to his second-in-command, as they brewed cocoa in their room.

"You should. Part of your job as Captain of the School."

"Yes. One can be loyal to Mr. Todd—goodness knows I've been loyal to him long enough! But one's got to think of the chaps as well."

"You bet! And they were only out of bounds for a few minutes—to rescue that monkey. Scott and de la Tour are beastly nuisances, but they don't deserve to be expelled."

"Lucas says he's going, too. Sir Philip Andrews won't be pleased about that. His father's an ambassador."

"I'd have a word with Sandy if I were you, Cranwell. Can't do any harm."

"I will. Just as soon as I drink this cocoa."

When the interview took place, however, Sandy, though helpful, was inclined to be pessimistic.

"The School would like them to have another chance—is that what you mean?"

"Yes, sir. It's not as if they broke bounds for their own ends."

"Nevertheless, it was a deliberate breach of orders."

"I know, sir. But if the circumstances were explained to Mr. Todd--about the monkey I mean, sir, and the sores on its back --he might--er --reconsider his decision."

"So you want me to do the dirty work, Cranwell?"

"Yes, sir. Well--er --I mean --"

"All right. I'll do my best. But I can't promise you a thing."

Mr. Pomphrey insisted on accompanying his friend to see Mr. Todd. Moral support, he called it.

"Dashed good of you, Simon," said Sandy, gratefully.

"Not at all. Scott, Lucas and de la Tour have caused me more trouble than the rest of the School put together, but I have to admit I'm rather fond of them."

"Todd isn't. That's obvious."

"He dislikes them because he is a bully --a dictator."

"That's probably sound psychology. . . . Come on --let's beard the lion in his den."

But the lion was unrelenting. He listened with ill-concealed impatience to what the English master had to say. Then, with a sweep of his thin hand, he brushed aside the plea for clemency.

"And that's my last word," he concluded, a trifle pompously. "I have not *yet* been appointed Head, but I am acting as such, and any attempt

on your part—or on Pomphrey's part—to undermine my authority is quite inexcusable."

Sandy's mouth tightened.

"I had no intention of trying to undermine your authority," he returned. "Even though you *were* officially Headmaster, I'd still consider it my duty to intervene on behalf of Scott and de la Tour."

"Discipline must be upheld. I warned them both—"

"But, Mr. Todd," interrupted Simple Simon, with surprising courage, "they are *good* boys, and strictly honourable. They are irritating, I agree; but boys of spirit usually are. Their motive for breaking bounds was basically good. They have never told a lie or done a mean action."

Sitting behind his desk, the Toad was smiling.

"If you have finished your oration, Pomphrey, perhaps you will allow me to speak. . . . Scott and de la Tour - and Lucas as well, though he is not involved on this occasion—are rebels! Rebels, I tell you. I will not have rebels in Strathmungo—either among the pupils *or the staff*!"

"If you are interring that Mr. Pomphrey and I are rebels," replied Sandy, with dangerous calm, "you are mistaken. We are only trying to make you see reason. Every boy in the School—with the exception perhaps of Deane and Lovejoy—would like Scott and de la Tour to have another chance. The staff feel the same. In our opinion

expulsion is too severe a penalty for a crime which, after all, was committed for a humane purpose."

Mr. Pomphrey nodded, blinking behind his spectacles.

"Quite. Quite. Very well put. I entirely agree with Mr. Beach."

"Do you, Pomphrey!" Mr. Todd's silky tone had an edge of steel. "Remember that I hold your future in my hands. I could easily put in an adverse report about your work. With your lack of qualifications—and at your age—where do you think you'd get another post?"

Simple Simon's round, chubby face became pinched. His hands clasped and unclasped behind his back. But when he spoke his voice was reasonably steady.

"I—I still agree with Mr. Beach."

Sandy, however, had had enough.

"Todd," he said, "you're a contemptible cad!"

The Toad sprang from his chair.

"*What!* What did you say?"

"You're a contemptible cad. What you've just said proves it."

"I—I'll report you to the Governors!"

"I hope you will. Then I'll be able to forget codes and customs and staff loyalties and tell them exactly what I think of you!"

The Toad was livid with rage. If Sandy had been a smaller man, he might have struck him. As it was, he restrained himself only with a visible effort.

"Get out!" he muttered. "Get out, I say! I shall run this School in my own way, Beach, without advice from you or anyone else. As for Scott and de la Tour, I intend to issue an order for their expulsion as soon as the Board of Governors confirm my appointment."

"Aren't you rather counting your chickens?" remarked Sandy.

"I'm not afraid of *your* opposition, if that's what you mean! Now—*get out!*"

And so the sentence stood.

Sentence of expulsion. . . . It was several days before Stubby, Henry and Frogs fully realised the implications of their punishment, for at first the idea had been too incredible to grasp. But as time went on, it began to nag at them like an aching tooth. Lines were all very well: they grumbled and got them over and forgot about them. Being confined to School was hard; but it was a punishment which passed and was soon forgotten, too. But expulsion—expulsion meant leaving Strathmungo for ever. . . .

This time the awkward sympathy of their friends was unrewarding. The situation was much too serious. In their three careless years at the School, Stubby, Henry and Frogs had given little thought to what Strathmungo meant to them. They had worked and played. They had sinned and been sinned against. 'Sufficient unto the day' had been their motto. They had

grumbled about the food and about the masters, had sweated and toiled on Ben Caladh and fallen off innumerable horses, muttering to themselves; they had gone sailing on an autumn evening, with the sun and wind on their faces; they had wandered in the garden, aware of the scent of flowers. But all these things had been part of an ordinary routine and, as such, had appeared of no particular value. Now, however, at the prospect of their loss, 'The Dark Avengers' began to appreciate them for the first time.

In spite of the arguments of his friends, Henry remained adamant in his decision to leave Strathmungo if they did.

"I'll write to my father," he told Stubby, "and whatever school you and Frogs go to, I'll jolly well ask him to send me there. But I haven't given up hope yet," he added. "The Toad says he won't sign the expulsion order till he's made Head, and Sandy still has a chance. If *he* gets the job everything will be all right."

But Stubby shook his head.

"Don't worry--the Toad will be appointed. He's got round Sir Philip with all his snarmy ways. Sandy's too honest."

"And then," sighed Frogs, "the order of the march for us!"

It was Wednesday afternoon again. They were sitting on a low wall in front of the stables, looking out across the Bay. A cold wind was

soughing in the trees behind them, but they were in shelter and did not realise how strong it was. The sun, hanging above Laggan Point, was veiled by a smoky cloud—a sure sign of bad weather.

The fateful meeting of the Board of Governors was to take place the following day, and their thoughts were focussed steadily on its probable outcome. They were no longer confined to the School, but the idea of going down to Sciffy Mac's with the other boys had been discarded. Lemonade and sweet biscuits would not restore their peace of mind; and in any case they were anxious to avoid the curious, pitying glances of their friends.

The stables were about fifty yards from the main building, and as they sat there, unhappily, the sound of music came floating across the intervening space. It was a junior choir practising in the hall, and they were singing the School song:

*Fair Strathrungo's hills and braes,
In the Highland air so clear:
To their beauty none we raise
Our song of love and memory dear.*

The music was based on the tune of *Will Ye No' Come Back Again?*, and somehow, combined with the simple, haunting words, it made both Stubby and Frogs think of their parents.

Stubby wasn't afraid of his father and mother;

but a lump came to his throat as he imagined their initial shocked surprise at the news of his expulsion and their subsequent efforts to conceal their disappointment. They wouldn't nag him with futile recriminations; but his own feeling that he had disgraced them, that he had let them down, would be none the less bitter. In one respect he was glad they were far away in Rhodesia; it would be easier to tell them what had happened in a letter than face to face. In another way he longed at this time for the comfort of their nearness - especially the nearness of his mother, though he scarcely admitted this even to himself.

Frogs thought of his father - a big, lonely man living in exile in Glasgow,* an undemonstrative man, apparently absorbed in his work as a French lecturer at the University. But Frogs knew that since the death of his mother, his father's deepest interest had been centred in himself. His unswerving purpose had been to secure for his son the best education Scotland had to offer, within his means; and Strathmungo, with its small fees and fine traditions, had filled the bill. If he were expelled, his father would not only be grievously hurt; he would also be forced to scrimp and save to ensure his further education.

For the first time, perhaps, knowledge of what they owed to their people stirred in the minds of the two boys, adding to their unhappiness at the idea of leaving Strathmungo. As the

junior choir began the chorus of the School song, Stubby tried to express his thoughts.

"It's kind of hard," he growled, "to think of saying goodbye to Strathmungo."

"Ah, *oui*." Frogs' eyes were on the white-flecked Bay. "It has been pleasant here. The horses, the sailing, the mountain climbing. Sandy and Simple Simon . . ." He broke off and shook his head. "*Non*—I cannot put it into words."

"The School song sort of sums it up," suggested Henry, who knew exactly what his friends were feeling.

The junior choir were finishing the last chorus. Stubby's thin, freckled face grew sombre.

"I never really understood what it meant before. The birds in the wood, the purple mountain, the sea down there. . ."

As he looked toward the Bay, his whole body became stiff and tense. His expression changed. He blurted out: "See that boat! Yonder—under Laggan Point!"

His companions turned in the direction of his pointing arm. They saw one of the School dinghies wallowing in the choppy waves. Its broken mast leaned over sideways, dipping the sail in the water.

"Must have been caught in a squall!" exclaimed Henry. "I can see people in it, too. Gosh—it's drifting on to the Boiler Reef!"

Stubby leaped off the wall.

“Bet you no one else has spotted it. You can’t see the Boiler Reef from the village. . . . Come on, chaps. If we take horses we should be at the jetty in five minutes. We’ll use the big motor-boat.”

“Can we reach the dinghy in time, though?” panted Henry, as they ran towards the stables.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE BOILER REEF

THE way from the School to the jetty was down a steep woodland path and then straight across the shore. In their headlong, bareback ride, the boys met no one.

Luckily the big general purposes motor-boat, *Strathmungo's Pride*, had not yet been taken in for the winter. She lay beside the jetty, rubbing her port gun'le against a patch of slimy green seaweed. Stubby, Henry and Frogs jumped off their horses, tied them hurriedly to a paling outside the boat-house and raced towards her. The wind was whining across the Rinns of Laggan, whipping spray and sand into their faces.

Once aboard, Stubby took charge. He had a natural mechanical bent and in any case had often handled this particular Kelvin engine.

"Here—hold the choke out, Frogs. Full out! I'll crank her up."

"Which—which is the choke?"

"There—at the side, you silly ass!"

He swung the starting handle. The engine coughed, spluttered, then settled down to a steady throb.

"Let in the choke, Frogs—slowly now. That's it. Cast off, Henry!"

Standing by the tiller, Stubby leaned forward, let in the clutch and adjusted the throttle. *Strathmungo's Pride* curtsied, dipped and pointed her slim nose in the direction of Laggan Point.

Once outside the shelter of the jetty, the boys felt her lift and swerve. The shallow, vicious waves were coming towards the port bow, tending to drive her shorewards, and Stubby had to use all his skill to maintain a course. It suddenly occurred to him that they had forgotten to look at the petrol-tank; but when Henry did so, on instructions, he announced that it was half-full.

Crouching on the bottom-boards, Frogs took over the throttle, while Stubby concentrated on steering. The tiller bucked in his hand like a live thing; but he kept the bow of *Strathmungo's Pride* steadily pointing towards the crippled dinghy, now plunging and yawing in the surf which surrounded the Boiler Reef. Henry knelt amidships, staring forward. His usually sleek fair hair was ruffled and unkempt. His eyes, behind spray-dimmed glasses, were bright with anxiety, for he knew that if once the small boat struck, its occupants would almost certainly be drowned in the turmoil of white water.

The Boiler Reef was scarcely a mile from the jetty, but to the boys the journey seemed endless. In point of fact it took only about ten minutes.

The wind seemed to push the waves higher as the dark cliffs of Laggan Point loomed up in front. Frogs, his fingers on the throttle-lever, was thrown forward again against the engine-cowling. His right shoulder was badly bruised, but he scarcely noticed it. Stubby clung with one hand to the stern-sheets and with the other to the tiller, balancing precariously. Neither of them paid the slightest attention to anything except the job on hand. But Henry, having nothing to do, was more aware of their surroundings. He saw Ben Caladh, huge and purple on their right; he saw the School swaying like a grey dot among the green; he saw the yellow shore, which had suddenly become peopled with tiny figures racing for the jetty. As he gripped the gun'le and suffered flying spray to soak his clothes, it occurred to him vaguely that their attempt at rescue was going to have an audience. Someone must have seen what was happening from the School.

They were getting nearer. The roar of the sea on the Boiler Reef had become clearly audible amid the sounds of the motor-boat's passage. Henry wiped his glasses. He saw the two figures in the dinghy waving frantically; and at last he thought he recognised them.

"It's a girl-- and a small boy!" he shouted to his friends. "I believe it's Sally and Midge. And there's MacSporran, too, clinging to the stump of the mast!"



Leaving them to drift helplessly on the boiler reef. . .

Stubby nodded, wasting no energy on superfluous speech. He knew that Midge had gone to see MacSpornan after lunch. He and Sally must have decided to take the monkey for a sail. It was fairly calm ashore—especially at Strathmungo Lodge under Ben Caladh—and they probably

hadn't realised it was so choppy in the Bay. A squall loosed off by the rising wind had caught them unawares, breaking the slender mast and leaving them to drift helplessly on to the Boiler Reef. . . .

Frogs looked up from the engine.

"*Ma foi!*" he gasped. "Will we reach them in time?"

"It's going to be a near thing," returned Stubby, his face pale and absorbed. "But as long as we don't drift on to the Boiler Reef ourselves, there's just a chance. . . . Can you rev her up a little?"

The French boy shook his head.

"The throttle is wide open."

"All right. We'll try to come round between the dinghy and the Reef."

They could see Sally and Midge quite plainly now, as the dinghy swung up and down in the creaming waves. Sally had on a mackintosh. A blue ribbon in her hair had come loose and was fluttering like a distress pennant. Midge wore an oilskin coat which flapped about him like the wings of a bat. His attention seemed to be divided anxiously between the approaching motor-boat and the chattering monkey on the mast. Sally was shouting desperately to the boys, hands cupped to her mouth, but the sound of her voice was whisked away on the turbulent wind.

As Stubby changed course to circle in behind

the floundering dinghy, he caught sight of the Boiler Reef itself for the first time—a jagged row of black rocks alternately rising above and falling beneath the furious waves. It was like the teeth of some great sea-monster, ready to snap at the little dinghy, which already was within only a few yards of it. For a moment Stubby's heart failed him; then he leaned hard on the tiller, and *Strathmungo's Pride* swung round and made straight for the narrow, spray-filled gap between the dinghy and the Reef.

"Okay, Sally!" he yelled. "Here we come!"

His plan was simple. He would run alongside the small boat, put a rope aboard and then try to tow it out of danger in the direction of the open sea. The question was, could *Strathmungo's Pride* drag them all clear of the sucking current?

"Henry!" he rapped out. "When we run alongside, jump into the dinghy with that rope and make fast."

"Right-oh!"

"And keep the throttle full open, Frogs—all the time."

"Oui."

They were ten yards away now. *Strathmungo's Pride* bucked and swerved and shook herself. Spray flew high over her bows. The dinghy was hurtling up and down like a swing at a circus. They could see the white faces of Sally and Midge. They could see MacSporran staring at

them from the splintered mast with a look of almost human anxiety.

Sally's voice came to them.

"Oh, Stubby—hurry, hurry!"

Henry had secured the motor-boat's painter to a ring-bolt in the stern. Now he stood amidships, with the rope coiled on his arm, waiting. Stubby let *Strathmungo's Pride* rise to a nasty, broken wave. Then he thrust at the tiller and she swooped down on the dinghy.

"Look out for the bump!" he yelled. "Now then, Henry!"

The two boats crashed together. Henry put his foot on the gun'le, leaped and entered the dinghy with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. Stumbling against Sally, he thrust the end of the painter through a ring-bolt in the bow and made a double knot.

Behind him, Sally was dumb; but Midge and his monkey both chattered incoherently.

Meanwhile, *Strathmungo's Pride* had slid past the dinghy, and as she drew ahead the painter jerked taut. Stubby glanced behind him. He saw Henry crouched in the dinghy's bow, Sally and Midge at his back, the boiling savagery of the Reef immediately astern.

"Keep her going, Frogs!" he exclaimed. "Pull out the choke a little."

As the strain came on, the steady throb of the engine changed to a slow, uneasy throb. The

painter thrummed like a telephone wire. Stubby glanced behind again.

Henry yelled: "We're still drifting in!"

The cruel black rocks were close astern—even closer than a moment before. Every time the motor-boat lifted to a wave, Stubby could feel the jerk of the undertow pulling her back. He realised that the weight of the dinghy was proving too much for the engine.

He came to a sudden decision.

"We'll let the dinghy go, Henry, and try to save ourselves. I'll turn and come alongside again. You must all climb aboard here!"

Strathmunga's Pride spun round, heaving and struck the dinghy broadside.

"Come on, Sally—be quick!" shouted Stubby.

She hesitated, one hand on the plunging gun'le.

"Oh, dear, we'll be drowned!"

"Don't be wet! Come on!"

She set her teeth. She sprang across two feet of white water and sprawled inelegantly on the bottom-boards of the motor-boat. But next moment she was on her feet again, desperately ashamed of her temporary panic. As she got up and leaned panting against the cowling of the engine, Midge, with MacSporran in his arms, landed beside her. Then came Henry, jumping like a gazelle as the two boats swung apart.

"Cut the painter!" shouted Stubby.

Henry got out his penknife and did as he was told, just as the stern of the dinghy touched the Boiler Reef. Then Stubby swung *Strathmungo's Pride* out to sea.

Kneeling beside the controls, Frogs was pressing on the throttle-lever, coaxing every ounce of power from the engine. Would they be able to escape from the current, now that they were no longer burdened by the dinghy?

For a while it seemed as if they were making no progress. Only half-a-dozen yards away, the dinghy was lifting and falling against one angry tooth of rock; and all at once they saw it split along the keel and begin to break up.

Sally's eyes filled with horror.

"Oh, Stubby - we'll be on the rocks, too!"

"Shut up!" he exclaimed, then added, tersely: "Excuse my language!"

Presently, to his intense relief, he realised that they were slowly pulling out from the Reef.

"There you are, Sally!" he shouted. "You're safe now. We're panning!"

She watched the swirling water gradually recede astern. She clenched her hands. Her face was streaked with spray, her hair in disorder. Her mackintosh had a long tear down one side. She looked across at Stubby.

"I'm sorry I was scared," she said, humbly.

He grinned.

"Don't blame you. But I knew it would be all right. . . . How's MacSporran, Midge?"

"Fine. He knows we're safe. Look at him smiling!"

They were in quieter water now, though the waves were still choppy and *Strathmungo's Pride* shivered and plunged as she headed back towards the boat-house. Frogs still kept the throttle full open, for they were all soaking wet and he had a vague feeling that the sooner they got into dry clothes the better.

As they approached the jetty they could see it crowded with people. Sally was surprised. The monkey chattered amiably and pointed.

Henry grinned. "That's it, MacSporran. *Belua multorum caput* the monster with many heads. In other words, the mob!"

"I can see Dad!" exclaimed Sally. "And Sandy and Simple Simon. And *score*s of boys."

Frogs squeezed some water out of his dripping, curly hair.

"It is a committee of reception!" he chuckled.

But Stubby wasn't so sure.

"More trouble, if you ask me! I expect they'll want us to pay for the dinghy or something!"

He eased the tiller, and as Frogs shut the throttle and disengaged the clutch, he brought *Strathmungo's Pride* alongside the jetty with a pardonable flourish.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SIR PHILIP IS GRATEFUL

THAT evening, Stubby, Henry and Frogs were invited to Strathmungo Lodge. Sally, very unwillingly, had been put to bed to recover from her experience, but Sir Philip himself, with old-fashioned hospitality, entertained the boys in his study. Half-a-dozen bottles of lemonade, a pile of chocolate biscuits, twelve fluffy meringues and a large seed cake began to disappear with astonishing rapidity.

Sir Philip beamed.

"Have another piece of cake, de la Tour. Don't stand on ceremony."

"*Merci bien, monsieur — c'est magnifique!* It evaporates in the mouth."

"Melts in the mouth," Henry corrected him.

"Ah, *oui* — *pardon!*"

"Good show!" chuckled Sir Philip. "Glad our baking is appreciated by a Frenchman. . . . Seriously though," he went on, becoming slightly pompous with embarrassment, "I can't begin to thank you for— for saving my daughter's life."

Stubby gulped a fragment of meringue. He looked surprised.

"It was nothing, sir," he said, attempting to dismiss the subject.

"Nothing!" exclaimed his host. "It was a tremendous performance! We saw most of what happened from the jetty, and Sally tells me you were all—wonderful!"

Frogs grinned.

"Sally makes the exaggeration! It was—what you call?—the only thing to do. . . . Please, may I have a chocolate biscuit?"

"Certainly! As many as you like." Sir Philip cleared his throat and became pompous again. "Trouble is, you boys are too modest. In my opinion, you have upheld the traditions of the School magnificently. You have shown that you have courage—'courage in the hour of danger.' " He smiled as he saw them blush and fidget. Quite obviously their one desire was to forget what had happened and enjoy their meal. But he would not forget—would never forget that moment on the jetty as he watched *Strathmungo's Pride* fighting her way clear of the Boiler Reef. "By the way," he added, "what's this I hear about you being in danger of expulsion, Scott—you and de la Tour? Mr. Beach mentioned it this afternoon."

Stubby's appetite received a check.

"It's quite true, sir," he replied, in a low voice.

"But what have you done to deserve it --you of all people?"

Henry put down his lemonade glass. He

adjusted his spectacles and spoke like an expert witness at a trial.

"Sir--would you allow me to explain?"

"Of course. Carry on, my boy."

"You may remember, sir, Scott and de la Tour and I were confined to School for bringing a horse on to the stage at the Concert?"

"Ah, yes, yes—a most unfortunate incident!"

"While we were confined to School, young Ferguson of the First got MacSporran from his parents in Africa."

"MacSporran?"

"A monkey, sir."

"Good heavens--not *another*! Sally seems to have acquired one, too."

"It's the same monkey, sir."

"The same monkey? Extraordinary!"

"MacNiven the gamekeeper was looking after him, but he turned out be very cruel, so we decided to kidnap him, the moukey I mean, sir

"But good Lord! Couldn't Ferguson have put the case to Mr. Todd?"

"Ferguson did, sir. But Mr. Todd refused to do anything about it."

"Indeed!" Sir Philip's eyebrows shot upwards; then a thoughtful expression appeared on his tanned and weatherbeaten face.

"Go on, Lucas," he said quietly.

"Well, sir, Scott and de la Tour broke bounds

one night, rescued MacSporran and handed him over to Sally."

"M'm. So that's where he came from! I was under the impression that she had found him in the woods."

Frogs decided to improve the shining hour.

"She has been most kind to him, *monsieur*. An angel of mercy."

A smile twitched one corner of Sir Philip's mouth.

"I should hesitate to apply such a description to my daughter!" he remarked, drily. "However — I do admit she's good with animals."

"Mr. Todd would never have known anything about it," continued Henry, "only Deane and Lovejoy saw Scott and de la Tour coming in at three o' clock in the morning, and they split — I mean, they gave the show away, sir."

"I see. Did you explain all this to Mr. Todd?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he still threatens to expel Scott and de la Tour?"

"He said that as soon as he is made Head of Strathmungo — after your meeting tomorrow, sir — he will give the necessary orders."

Sir Philip frowned. He smoothed his small moustache.

"A curious situation!" he said, finally. "Very curious indeed! I must make some inquiries. . . . In the meantime, boys, leaving aside this — er —

rather delicate matter, I should like to say again how much I am indebted to you all. Is there anything—within reason, of course—that I could do for you in return?"

There was a short silence. Stubby found both Henry and Frogs staring at him with peculiar intensity. Frogs' shoe hacked his shin under the table, while Henry's lips formed the words: "*Facta non verba.*"

Sir Philip observed the by-play.

"Is there something?" he asked.

"Well, sir," Stubby was hesitant, "there *is*, actually."

"Tell me, then."

"Please excuse us, sir, but -but we were hoping you'd make Mr. Beach Headmaster."

"What!" Sir Philip puffed out his cheeks, coughed and looked extremely uncomfortable. "Ah - hum! Now really, Scott. . ."

"I'm very sorry, 'r."

"Oh -er- don't apologise. But -these affairs, you know. Not for discussion between you and me. Matter for the Governors. . . . Truth to tell, I didn't realise -er- " He broke off suddenly and rose from the table. "Awkward situation!" he muttered. "Dashed awkward situation. Now -er - don't you think it's time you were getting back to School?"

The boys agreed. They had done their best to implement the vows of 'The Dark Avengers,'

and any further conversation with their host would be an anti-climax. Besides, the bottles and plates were now empty.

"Thank you very much for the cakes and lemonade, sir," said Stubby, as Sir Philip accompanied them to the front door.

"Don't mention it, my dear boy! Glad to see you all at any time. . . . By the way, would you find Mr. Beach when you get back? Tell him I want to see him. At once."

"Yes, sir."

"Goodnight, then. And—er—I shall never forget what happened this afternoon."

Two hours later the boys were in bed. The light had been switched off. Outside, the wind had fallen, and it had begun to rain. They could hear the patter on the roof and a slow gurgling in the rones.

Frogs sighed.

"I am so disturbed about tomorrow! I will not sleep for hours," he said.

"You'll be snoring in five minutes," replied Stubby. "I know you!"

"Ah, *non* -I do not make the snore!"

"Don't be wet! You make a noise like Krakatoa—that volcano Simple Simon was telling us about. Doesn't he, Henry?"

"Worse, if anything."

"All the same, Frogs, I know how you feel." Stubby lay back against the pillows. "I just hope

we haven't done Sandy any more harm with Sir Philip."

"I don't think so," returned Henry, judicially. "The old boy sounded kind of gruff and abrupt, but—why did he send for Sandy?"

"That is what makes the puzzle for me," said Frogs yawning. "More than a puzzle—a mystery!"

Henry turned on his side, tucking the blankets below his chin.

"If Sandy is made Head, Stubby, you and Frogs won't be expelled. That's certain."

"Yes. But what hope has Sandy got?"

"You never know. Sir Philip had a funny look in his eye tonight. 'Awkward situation! Dashed awkward situation!' Remember? . . . I think he was surprised when I told him about the Toad refusing to do anything for MacSpörran."

"Don't start kidding yourself, Henry!"

"I shan't. . . . However, the Governors' meeting is tomorrow morning. We'll know the worst then."

"I bet it is the worst, too!" yawned Stubby. "In a way I shan't be sorry to leave, if the Toad is made Headmaster."

There was a low rumbling from the direction of Frogs' bed.

"Kakatoa in eruption," said Henry.

In the dark Stubby grinned to himself.

"Good old Frogs!" he murmured, sleepily.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE NEW HEADMASTER

THE next day was one never to be forgotten in the annals of Strathmungo. There were no classes in the morning, and while the Governors debated in the library, most of the boys were at the village, or on the shore, or riding in the sports field. After lunch, according to custom, everyone was to foregather in the hall, to welcome the new Head.

Stubby, Henry and Frogs remained in School. They were nervous and excited, and Midge, trying to comfort them, was told by Stubby to go and bury himself. At about eleven o' clock, when the Governors had been in session for half-an-hour, they approached the open window of the library, which looked out on the senior quad. They stood a little to one side, leaning negligently against a water-butt, apparently absorbed in scholarly meditation but in fact straining their ears to make out what the men in the room were saying.

As they listened, the murmur of voices crystallised.

"And I base my conclusions, gentlemen, on the

solid foundation of Mr. Todd's scholastic achievements. He is an honours graduate in Mathematics, a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Education. Such degrees show him to be a man of application and character—a man likely to impart his own mental discipline on the pupils under his control. He is also senior to any other master in Strathmungo. I move, therefore, that Mr. Hector Todd be appointed."

The boys did not recognise this voice, nor the one that followed.

"Mr. Chairman, I second the motion. We cannot afford to take risks. Mr. Todd has put his hand to the plough and has a firm grip of the helm. Gentlemen, do not let us change horses in mid-stream!"

Henry muttered something scornful about mixed metaphors; but Fogs' eyes rolled and Stubby's expression became one of acute pessimism.

Then came the gruff accents of Sir Philip Andrews.

"Gentlemen, we have two proposals for the vacant headmastership, one in favour of Mr. Alexander Beach, the other in favour of Mr. Hector Todd. Both duly seconded. Before putting the matter to the vote, I should like, as your Chairman, to say a few words."

"Good idea, Sir Philip," someone remarked. "You know both men better than any of us."

"Yes. And my personal choice—arrived at, I may say, only recently—my personal choice has been based on a study of their respective methods of obtaining discipline. The question I put to myself was this. Who is likely to get the best out of courageous, high-spirited boys—the man who rules harshly with a rod of iron, or the man who inspires respect and affection by means of his own high standard of conduct and by his sympathetic understanding of the motives which animate a boy? . . . Now, gentlemen," he said, "we will take a vote."

There was movement, a buzz of conversation and a rustling of papers inside the room. Scarcely daring to breathe, 'The Dark Avengers' began to edge closer to the window. But just at that moment—to their intense chagrin—there was a sound of voices, and Cranwell and his second-in-command came strolling into the quad, some twenty yards away. Frogs groaned; but it was obvious that only one course of action remained open to them. Unwillingly, therefore, guilt shining on their faces, they moved away from the water-butt, trying to ignore the curious and suspicious glances of the two senior boys.

They went into the garden and paced gloomily up and down. In spite of what they had heard, they were still completely in the dark concerning the Governors' final decision; and their main topic of conversation was Cranwell's 'snoopiness.' One

minute more of privacy and they might now have known their fate. . . .

Suddenly they heard a patter of hasty feet, and Midge, his hair flopping over his eyes, his face pinched with dismay, came running towards them.

"I—I say!" he gasped. "The Governors have finished their meeting. They've sent for Mr. Todd."

"*Parbleu!*" cried Frogs. "They have made the choice, then? The Toad is Headmaster?"

"I don't know. But it looks like it—sending for him."

Henry sighed.

"*Fama infelix*. Unhappy news!"

"You've said it!" Stabby's voice was strangely flat. "Oh, well thanks for telling us, Midge. Now, beat it. You don't want to be seen with chaps who are going to be expelled."

Midge was on the point of tears.

"That doesn't matter. All the chaps in the First know you don't deserve it. I told them. And anyway, perhaps Mr. Todd will be so happy he'll let you off."

"Don't be wet!" replied Stabby, with a hollow laugh. "The very first thing he'll do is to give us our marching orders."

"So long, then," quavered Midge. "I—I'll tell Mac Sporan. He'll be jolly sad, too."

Henry surveyed the small retreating figure.

"The child is quite upset!" he observed.

"Not half so upset as I am!" returned Stabby.

"Look here," he went on, grimly, "what about 'The Dark Avengers' showing the Toad they have a sting in their tail?"

"A sting?" inquired Henry.

"Yes. In about half-an-hour the Toad will send for Frogs and me—to tell us we've been expelled. Now then, you know that cupboard in his room—where he keeps the parcels?"

"*Oui*—what about it?" said Frogs.

"When he's finished jawing us, he'll go to that cupboard—to get our report cards. What if a bucket of water fell on his head as he opened it?"

Frogs grinned.

"It would be *superbe—magnifique!*"

"I see what you mean," said Henry, quietly. "While he's in the library with the Governors we go to his room, fix the bucket behind the cupboard door— and await developments."

Stubby nodded.

"It will serve him right. And as we're going to be expelled at any rate, it doesn't matter what we do."

"You mean, in for the penny in for the pound avoirdupois?" said Frogs.

"The pound sterling," amended Stubby. "Yes. That's what I mean. You needn't help us unless you like, Henry. *You* aren't being —"

"Do you think I'd jolly well desert you now!" interrupted his friend, indignantly.

"All right. Good old Henry!" Stubby grinned. "Come on, there's a bucket in the boot-locker."

Five minutes sufficed to complete the arrangements. Filled with water from a ground-floor lavatory, the bucket was placed on the top shelf of the cupboard, the handle being secured to a staple by a length of string. Then it was balanced on the edge of the shelf, so that when the door opened it would immediately fall and tip out its load of water before the string tightened. When they had finished, Stubby, Henry and Frogs retired to their room, 'to await developments.'

It was Cranwell who brought the expected summons shortly after twelve o'clock. There was an odd, humorous glint in his eye.

"The new Head wants to see you in his study, Scott. Right away. You and de la Tour. *And* Lucas."

"All right. . . . What are you smiling about, Cranwell?"

"Never mind. Get running!"

Going downstairs they were not altogether unhappy. The crisis had come at last, and in one way it was a relief. Besides, the Toad was going to find out that he didn't hold *all* the cards. . .

"What does he want *me* for?" muttered Henry, as they approached the fatal door.

"Can't tell you that," replied Stubby. "But anyway you're jolly lucky. You'll see the water coming down on his head after all!"

Frogs knocked; but at first there was no answer. Stubby shrugged his shoulders.

"Pretending he's deaf—as usual. Try again."

This time a voice called out: "Come in!"

"Gosh!" whispered Henry. "That's Sandy."

Stubby frowned.

"I expect the Toad's giving him a lecture about something. . . . Let's go in."

But when they entered and closed the door behind them, Sandy was seated by himself behind the desk.

"Ah, the three musketeers!" he smiled, leaning back in his chair.

"Er —excuse me, sir," said Stubby, "we came to see the Head. He sent for us."

"Quite right, Scott. You're speaking to him now."

It was a dramatic moment. In the silence the boys could hear a faint hiss from the coals burning in the grate. The announcement was so unexpected, so full of joyous implications, that for a moment they could scarcely take it in. It was like coming out of a dark wood only to be dazzled and blinded by the sun. Frogs' mouth fell open. Stubby sighed, though the happiness surging in his heart was tempered by a twinge of uneasiness —uneasiness not unconnected with a bucket. . . .

Henry blurted out: "You — you mean you're the new Head, sir?"

"Yes. Sorry if you're disappointed!"

"Gosh —no! We're not disappointed, sir."

Frogs found his tongue.

"We are overjoyed!" he cried, waving his hands. "It is the best news we have heard in a month of Sabbath days!"

"Thank you very much," grinned Sandy. "But why should you all look so surprised?"

"You see, sir," explained Stubby, awkwardly, "young Ferguson told us that the Governors had sent for Mr. Todd, and —well—"

"A misunderstanding, eh?" Sandy leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk which had now been cleared of algebra books. "I sent for you as soon as possible," he went on, "so as to put your minds at rest. I discussed the matter with Sir Philip Andrews, and we have decided that Scott and de la Tour should *not* be expelled."

"Oh, gosh!" breathed Stubby involuntarily, while Frogs' eyes expressed his pent-up gratitude.

"As for you, Lucas," Sandy continued, "I don't suppose you'll want to leave Strathmungo, now that your friends are staying?"

"No, sir. No, indeed. . . ."

"Good." Sandy became more brisk and business-like. "But I hope you all realise that in acting as you did, you *deserved* to be punished. And I warn you, as Headmaster of Strathmungo I may not be so lenient in future! Rules are made to be obeyed. . . . Agreed?"

"Yes, sir," said Stubby, quietly.

Sandy seemed to consider the answer satisfactory. He looked squarely at the boys.

"But I know that if you put your minds to it, you can be an example of good conduct to the whole School. I am depending on each one of you to show such an example."

"We'll do our best, sir," replied Stubby, groping for words. "But—er—it's difficult to be good *all* the time. I mean—sometimes things go wrong, sir, when you're trying to do your best."

The new Head smiled. It was an honest opinion, honestly expressed.

"I know, Scott! But allowances can be made for that kind of thing." His smile suddenly faded, and he spoke with some earnestness. "When you grow up, you'll discover that it's not what a man *does* that really counts. It's the motive behind it. *Why* he does it. That's the important factor." He paused, then continued: "One other thing. I believe there's been rather a feud going on between you three and Deane and Lovejoy. Am I right?"

"Er— yes, sir," admitted Stubby.

"Well—it must stop! I've sent for them—" A knock sounded at the door. "That should be them now. . . . Come in!"

Dirty Dick and Paleface looked uneasy; and when they saw 'The Dark Avengers' their uneasiness changed to acute anxiety. Dirty Dick thrust a lock of dark hair back from his forehead and shuffled his feet. Paleface looked furtively about the room as if seeking a chance of escape—at the fire, at the window, at the closed

cupboard: everywhere but at the Head and the other boys.

Sandy fixed them with a none too friendly stare.

"Now, Deane, you, too, Lovejoy, I don't like your methods. I *suspect* that one of you blew the whistle which wrecked the Concert; and I *know* it was Deane who told Mr. Todd about Scott and de la Tour breaking bounds."

"I—I thought it was my duty, sir," murmured Dirty Dick.

"Was that really your motive? Or was it to get your own back on Scott and his friends?"

"Well --er--"

"Exactly. The same motive as made you blow the whistle during Lucas's play."

Paleface screwed up his courage.

"That was my fault, sir," he said, in a low voice.

"You mean, *you* blew the whistle, Lovejoy?"

"Yes, sir."

For a moment Sandy's expression softened.

"I'm glad you can tell the truth at any rate. . . . But the point is—I don't want any more of this nonsense! You and Deane are going to shake hands with Scott, Lucas and de la Tour, here and now. And I warn you all"—here Sandy glanced at each of the boys in turn and frowned in quite a devastating way—"I warn you that if you don't live peaceably together in future, it's going to be a sad day for all concerned. Is that understood?"

Dirty Dick and Paleface willingly accepted the terms. They had been afraid of what might happen to them, if, as they suspected, Scott and de la Tour were no longer in danger of being expelled, and had come prepared for far worse trouble than this.

"The Dark Avengers," too, signified their intention of keeping the bargain.

"Shake hands on it, then," ordered Sandy. "Don't look so sheepish," he continued, as the boys slowly and awkwardly followed his instructions. "That's better. . . . Right! Deane and Lovejoy may now leave."

As the door closed behind the Fourth Formers, Sandy got up.

"Before the rest of you go," he said, smiling, "I rather think there's a parcel for Scott—in the cupboard."

Suddenly to the boys the room felt grievously hot and stuffy. It had come at last. The dreaded thing was about to happen. In the very moment of joy and relief, disaster was once again about to overtake them.

Henry made a gulping sound.

"What's the matter?" inquired Sandy.

"Er—nothing, sir. I—I just swallowed the wrong way."

"I see. Well, I'll get that parcel."

He was half-way to the cupboard when Frogs uttered a sepulchral groan.

"Oh -ah- -oh -"

Sandy stopped.

"What on earth! What's wrong with *you*, de la Tour?"

Frogs was leaning against the desk, one hand to his forehead, the other clawing the air.

"There is a mist before my eyes. I am seeing the stars. . . ."

"Don't say you're going to have another bout of sleep-walking?"

"Ah, *non*. This time it is my heart."

Frogs clutched the right side of his lower abdomen--an unusual gesture for a boy afflicted with heart disease. Then he puffed out his fat, ruddy cheeks and glanced desperately at his friends, as if seeking support. But Stubby and Henry were standing there like statues, staring straight ahead of them and temporarily incapable either of thought or action.

Sandy came over and examined Frogs.

"You don't *look* ill," he remarked.

It was then that Stubby made a supreme effort.

"He--he's had a shock, *ir*," he blurted out, with some truth. "French people are so excitable."

"Ah, *oui*," gasped Frogs. "I am as weak as the infant cat!"

"Perhaps we'd better put him to bed, sir," continued Stubby, his voice quavering like a loose string on a violin. "We could --er--get the mail--er--later on."

A strange look came into Sandy's eye. It made 'The Dark Avengers' feel hollow and cold inside.

"Is there any reason why you don't want me to open the cupboard?" he asked.

Stubby's lower jaw worked like a piston. He, too, appeared ready to have a shock. But at last words came.

"Oh, gosh—er—why should there be, sir? Er—"

"It's the relief of not being expelled, sir," interrupted Henry, in a nervous whisper. "It has affected de la Tour's brain."

"How sad!" murmured Sandy. "First his heart. Now his brain. But you're recovering, aren't you, de la Tour?"

Frogs was finding it difficult to maintain the deception.

"I—er—think so," he said.

"That's the spirit!" approved Sandy. "No need for a heart-specialist or a psychiatrist just yet!" He grinned and went towards the cupboard again. "I won't keep you a moment. I'm sure there's a parcel."

The world stood still. From the playing field outside came a rattle of hooves and the shouts of boys. A blackbird sang in a rhododendron bush beside the window. Frogs was considering the idea of falling on the floor, foaming at the mouth, when all at once, like an answer to prayer, a quiet knock sounded at the study door.

Mr. Pomphrey put his fluffy head inside.

"I say, Sandy, the Governors want to see you at once. Something rather important."

The new Head paused with one hand outstretched towards the cupboard. He let it fall to his side.

"Right-oh, Simon." He strode back across the room and joined his friend. "You may go now, boys," he said from the door, "just as soon as de la Tour feels better. I'll let you have the parcel in the afternoon, Scott."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The two masters left the room; and for some unaccountable reason Sandy shut the door behind him.

Stubby sighed. •

"Gosh - that was a narrow escape!"

"I nearly had heart-failure," admitted Henry.

"*Et moi aussi!*" Frogs beat his forehead. "It was terrible!"

"He didn't believe you were ill, either," declared Stubby. "Thank goodness Simple Simon put in an appearance. . . . Listen, we must get that bucket away before he comes back!"

They wasted no time. Henry unlocked the cupboard door and gently eased it open. Stubby stood on a chair and caught the bucket before it overturned. Then he slid it back on to the shelf and began to prise out the anchoring staple with his penknife. It came away at last, and he was about to untie the string attached to the handle

of the bucket, when they heard footsteps in the hall.

"Hurry up!" breathed Henry.

Stubby handed the bucket down to Frogs. Water splashed over the side and formed a little pool on the linoleum-covered floor. Then, jus



Sandy had returned.

as Stubby jumped off the chair and locked the cupboard, the study door opened.

Sandy had returned.

"Still here!" he said, cheerfully. Then he saw Frogs vainly trying to hide the bucket behind his ample form. "What's the idea, de la Tour?" he inquired.

"Please - I do not know - I mean—"

"You're feeling quite well again?"

"Ah, *oui monsieur*. I am as fit as the violin!"

"Fine! . . . I say, what's this tied to the bucket? A string with a staple on it!"

"Er—*oui, monsieur*."

Sandy waited. There was a short, uncomfortable silence.

"Can't anyone explain?" he said, at last. Then he chuckled. "Wait a minute--perhaps I can guess! The floor of my room is rather dirty, so you decided to scrub it?"

Stubby flushed.

"Well—er—"

"That was jolly decent of you," continued the new Head with an amiable smile. "Look—there's soap, a scrubber and a couple of mops in the press over there. Please just carry on. . . . I'm sure this was *your* kindly idea, Scott, so you'd better do the scrubbing. Lucas and de la Tour can wield the mops."

Stubby had a violent twinge of conscience.

"Excuse me, sir. I. you really want to know—"

But Sandy interrupted.

"I don't want to know anything. I can guess! However, the floor does need scrubbing, and—well, perhaps you're rather lucky to get off with that! I'll be back just before lunch to see how things are going."

When he had gone, Stubby turned to his friends.

"By Jove, he's a sarcastic old blighter when he wants!"

Henry nodded.

"Jolly well pulling our legs the whole time!"

"Oh, well—we'd better get on with the floor," continued Stubby with distaste. "Look here, Frogs—you do the scrubbing."

"But Sandy said. . . ."

Stubby smiled—a suave and dictatorial smile.

"I suppose you *would* like some sweets out of my parcel?"

"Ah, *oui*. But—"

"All right. Go to it. After all, hard work is a pleasure— isn't it, Henry?"

"Yes." Henry raised a Hitlerian hand. "*Labor ipse voluptas!*"

Frogs shook his list at them.

"You great stiff!" he muttered. Then he grinned and went towards the press for the soap and scrubbing-brush. "*Eh, bien,*" he said, philosophically, "I will do the work of the donkey!"

Meanwhile, Sandy had gone to Simple Simon's room, there to enjoy a smoke and discuss the events of the morning. Mr. Pomphrey was in high spirits at his friend's appointment. He was also delighted to learn that Scott and de la Tour were, after all, to remain at School.

Sandy recounted the incident of the bucket.

"So I put them on to scrub the floor," he concluded, chuckling. "You should have seen their faces!"

"But Sandy—do you really think they deserved such drastic treatment?"

"Of course. They had it in for Todd. I knew there was something fishy about that cupboard, and when I came back after seeing the Governors I realised at once what it was. I wish you'd seen de la Tour, standing there with his mouth open, and slopping water all over the floor from the bucket."

"So you think they meant Todd to open the cupboard and get a shower-bath?"

"I'm sure of it!"

Mr. Pomphrey shook his head, but there was an appreciative twinkle in his eyes.

"Dear me, what savage creatures they are! And yet, to me at any rate, they are most lovable boys."

"I know." Sandy wrinkled his forehead. "It's jolly difficult trying to be fair. There are the boys you're fond of—Scott, Lucas, de la Tour and so on— and the boys you dislike—Deane and Lovejoy, for instance. And yet you mustn't show it. Believe me, Simon, I'm scared of my new job."

Mr. Pomphrey put a gentle hand on his arm.

"No, no. We'll back you up—all of us. And now that Todd is going to that Edinburgh school, things will be a lot easier."

"Yes. But I'll be glad when today's show is over!"

Sandy sighed a little.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A SURPRISE FOR 'THE DARK AVENGERS'

AT half past two, all the boys gathered in the hall. Stubby, Henry and Frogs were careful to be early, so that they might secure a seat at the back, well away from the eye of authority on the platform. It was a great day for them: Sandy had been made Head, and the shadow of expulsion had passed on. They were prepared to relax and enjoy themselves.

"I hope Sandy makes a decent speech," said Henry and added gleefully: "'Oh frabjous day, calloo, callay!'"

"What foreign language is that?" inquired Stubby.

"It's not foreign. Just Lewis Carroll."

Frogs chuckled.

"'Oh frabjous day!'" he repeated. "'Calloo, callay!' Ah—that is good!"

"I think it's daft!" said Stubby.

The platform party began to appear: Cranwell and his second-in-command, the masters, the Governors, then the Toad—'looking like a wet

fish,' in Stubby's expressive phrase—and finally Sandy, Sir Philip Andrews—and Sally.

"Why is *she* on the platform?" demanded Frogs.

"Showing off, I expect," replied Henry. "Girls like to be in the limelight."

"Glad we're not up there!" said Stubby, thoughtfully. "I'd hate it, with everybody staring at me."

Sir Philip opened the proceedings by advancing to the reading-desk with a friendly smile.

"Now boys, quiet, please." He held up his hand. "Today I have great pleasure in introducing your new Head, Mr. Alexander Beach." The applause welled up and rattled in the high roof like a bombardment. Sir Philip continued: "As a matter of fact, Mr. Beach requires no introduction to Strathmungo, and I feel sure that the Governors can depend on you all to give him the utmost loyalty and support. . . . I will now call on Mr. Beach."

"Gosh," whispered Henry, "Sandy looks quite nervous!"

"No wonder," grinned Stubby, "having to make a speech up there!"

Sandy began in a quiet, hesitant voice, which, however, gradually acquired more confidence and power.

"First of all, I should like to thank Sir Philip and the Governors for the honour they have done me. To become Head of one's old School is the

ambition of many masters. I have been lucky enough to achieve my ambition—and I can only promise to do my very best to uphold the great traditions of Strathmungo. But no headmaster can do his work properly without the support of his staff and of the pupils in his charge. The success of a school depends on team-work—not on any individual. I am happy to be the skipper of the team. But remember—it's the team that counts."

There was a chorus of fruity "Heah! Heahs!" from the Governors, and wild applause from the boys, who weren't particularly interested in what Sandy was saying but were prepared, in the circumstances, to cheer at anything.

"Good old Sandy!" yelled Stubby, above the din. "He's going great guns!"

"What do you say about guns?" asked Frogs.

"Never mind, idiot! Listen. . . ."

"Now," continued the new Head, with a faint smile, "before we sing our School song, which is customary on these occasions, I have a very pleasant duty to perform. . . . No doubt you have all heard of the Donaldson Medal—in other words, Strathmungo's V.C.—which was instituted many years ago by a distinguished pupil of the School, David Donaldson, the explorer. The Donaldson Medal is awarded to pupils who perform a conspicuous act of gallantry; but the conditions are stiff, and it has been won only six times in the past fifty years. I am proud to say that

after due consideration, the Governors have decided that no fewer than three medals should be awarded to present pupils."

He paused, and there was a buzz of surprised and excited conversation.

"Jolly good show!" exclaimed Stubby, with enthusiasm. "Wonder who the chaps are?"

"Cranwell for one, I should think," said Henry. "He rescued that dog in the quarry."

"And young Elliot, probably. For putting out the fire in the boot-locker."

Frogs chuckled.

"Perhaps they are giving it to you, Stubby, for being Jock o' Hazeldean in Henry's play!"

"I jolly well deserve it, too! . . . Ssh—Sandy's starting up again."

Sandy was smiling. The obstacle of his first public speech had been safely negotiated, and he was now much more at ease.

"The boys concerned," he said, "are quite unaware of their distinction, and as under the terms of David Donaldson's will they have to address the assembled School, perhaps for their own peace of mind it's just as well!"

There was a ripple of laughter, in which 'The Dark Avengers' joined more appreciatively than anyone. It was always pleasant to see fellow-pupils making fools of themselves.

"Gosh— poor chaps!" gloated Stubby.

Frogs sighed in sheer contentment.

"I will make the cat-calls!" he said. "It will be—"

"Shut up!" hissed Henry. "Here's Sandy again."

"I should like the three boys concerned to come up to the platform now. They will be presented with the medals by Miss Sally Andrews—most appropriately, too. It was for a gallant rescue of Sally and Ferguson of the First—not to mention MacSporran the monkey—that the medals have been won by—*Scott, Lucas and de la Tour.*"

A gale of cheering echoed in the hall. But as the noise rose and fell, assailing their ears, 'The Dark Avengers' looked at each other in terrible dismay.

"Good Lord!" breathed Stubby.

"This is not correct!" cried Frogs. "It is a mistake!"

Henry was so stunned that for once no Latin tag occurred to him.

"Come now, boys!" called Sandy, beckoning to them. "We're waiting."

Obediently they rose and went towards the platform 'like sheep to the abattoir,' as Frogs might have said. Their faces were like beetroots. Their hearts were in their boots.

"This is a tragedy!" muttered Stubby.

All round them boys were shouting and cheering.

"Come on, Stubby!"

"Get a move on, Frogs. Don't look so wet!"

"Good old Henry!"

Sandy was chuckling. A few yards behind him, Sir Philip and Mr. Pomphrey both looked extraordinarily happy—even smug.

Sally came forward, with three small, flat boxes in her hand. She smiled at the three boys, who now stood in a sheepish, dejected row before her. The applause faded into silence.

"On behalf of my father," she said in a clear voice, "I have great pleasure in presenting these medals to you. For myself, and for Midge as well, I should like to say 'thank you' for saving our lives."

She handed a box to each. Stubby and Henry murmured incoherently; but Frogs, by this time almost hysterical, burst into a flurry of language.

"Ah, *merci, mademoiselle!*" he cried. "I do not know whether I am standing on my head or on my large toe!"

The platform party laughed, and there were a few derisive cat-calls from the audience; but before the situation could get out of hand, Sandy signalled for silence.

"Thank you, Sally. . . . Now, as I said, under the terms of David Donaldson's will, the recipients of the Medal have to address the assembled School. But on this occasion, when three medals have been presented at once I think one of the boys can do it for the others. . . . Scott, will you say a word?"

Dimly, as if at a far distance, Stubby heard shouts of encouragement.

"Go it, Stubby!"

"Speak up, my lad!"

"Where's your horse?"

He wished he had never been born. This, definitely, was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. He glanced wildly at Henry and Frogs. But they—released from the necessity of speech-making themselves—were smiling hugely, like apes. He had looked for their sympathy; but from these false friends it was not forthcoming. . . .

He clenched his hands and turned to the audience. Then he felt Sandy's hand on his shoulder. He gulped as the hall grew silent.

"Er - well," he began, "Henry and Frogs and I—I mean, Lucas and de la Tour and I—we didn't do anything to deserve a medal." Perspiration was standing out on his freckled forehead. "Other chaps," he went on, grimly, "would have done better and perhaps saved the dinghy. Well, that's all—" He broke off and gulped again. "That's all, except—well, we're all jolly glad we belong to Strathmungo, and —oh, well —"

But as he hesitated, unable to think of anything else to say, his anguish was finally obliterated by a great roar of cheering.

At a sign from Sandy, Mr. Pomphrey rose from his chair, crossed to the piano and struck the opening chords of the School song.